Metamorphosis
From Dretch To Demon Lord

The Complete Journey

by Aeryn "Blackdirge" Rudel

EN Publishing

William Kwan (Order #41505129)

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The Metamorphosis Trilogy:

Book 1: Death of a Demon Lord
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Book 3: Ascension

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Book 1:
Death of a Demon Lord

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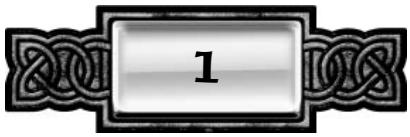

Death was not at all what Hazergal expected. The pain was fleeting, and even that seemed to unravel in the darkness that followed. He remembered Azadan standing above him, and the glint of steel from the man's sword. And above all, he remembered a dreadful chill of certainty, the chill that came with looking the author of one's death in the eye.

Hazergal distinctly recalled the discordant hum of the sword descending, and the bright explosion of pain that followed. The last sensation he remembered from his mortal life was the taste of steel as the blade of his murderer passed through his mouth and split his head in twain. The archwizard who had terrorized the nation of Othregard for two centuries was no more. All the power and influence Hazergal had painstakingly built over the years was destroyed with a single stroke of a traitor's sword.

After the bright shock of death, the light and sound of life faded swiftly, replaced by a swallowing emptiness. Thrust senseless into this void, Hazergal drifted, clinging to the one thing that refused to surrender to the emptiness of death: hatred. His hatred for the traitorous Azadan—whom Hazergal had raised from a lowly servant to a powerful war captain—blazed within him. He fastened to it, like a drowning man cleaving to driftwood on a stormy sea.

He had trusted Azadan too much, had given the man free rein to organize and lead his armies. And how could he not? The swarthy Kalvanian was loyal, and so very competent. Azadan had led Hazergal's armies to victory after victory, smashing the arrayed might of the Othregardian Dukes, like a child knocking over tin soldiers. Hazergal had heaped all manner of rewards upon his war captain for this exemplary service. But all the while, the specter of rebellion had been whispering deceit into Azadan's heart—until, at last, he had struck Hazergal down.

Images of Azadan danced before Hazergal, kindling the flames of his formidable intellect and relentless will, as he descended through a fathomless gloom. As he drifted, Hazergal felt the void around him change, from a vast emptiness to a palpable darkness. There was a cold and certain

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hunger in this new blackness, and Hazergal felt tendrils of darkness lash out, attempting to scour his soul clean of memories and power. The arch-mage railed against this theft, rallying his awakening mind around his memories, fanning the flames of his defiance with vivid, vengeful fantasies: fantasies of long and painful retribution on the architect of his destruction. The stoic face of Azadan floated within the archmage's mind. The emotions it churned in him shielded Hazergal from the awful power of the void, until at last, the darkness receded, and he found his mundane senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell—restored to him.

Then the dark eternity of the void gave way to dim gray light, and Hazergal saw that he was falling, slowly, towards a featureless plane that stretched off into infinity. Below him throngs of humanoids and other, less identifiable beings huddled together in tight masses, their voices drifting up, the garble of a thousand different tongues joined together in a single, vast chorus. Hazergal strained to pick out words from the ear-shattering cacophony, and as the torrent of guttural prayers and hate-filled benedictions poured into his head, horror crept into his soul and found purchase there.

The archmage heard a blasphemous invocation bubbling from the ichthyoidal lips of a group of sahuagin, a foul and evil race of fish-men, as they cried out to Dagon, the Lord of the Briny Deep. Beyond the sahuagin stood a tangled knot of harpies, their cackling voices lifted in unison to invoke the name of Pazuzu, master of all evil borne on the air. Other names filtered through the aural chaos as Hazergal slowly descended—Orcus, Kostchtchie, Demogorgon, Azazel—all names of the powerful, demonic rulers of the Abyss.

When Hazergal's feet touched the gray, hard-packed earth, he discovered he had a body, of sorts, composed of little more than tangible ether. He stood alone among the endless throng of creatures, all howling paeans of worship to their patron demon lord. In life, Hazergal had studied the obscure lore of the planes, and he knew this place. It was known as Abrigor, the Plane of the Damned, a gateway and waiting place for the souls of mortal creatures who belonged to the fell rulers of the Abyss.

The dead were known as petitioners. All memory was erased from their minds save for their singular devotion to their demonic patron. Naked, appearing much as they had when alive, these petitioners were the basic building blocks for all Abyssal life. The malleable form of a petitioner could be transformed into whatever type of fiendish creature the fickle

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demon lords desired.

For the majority of Abyssal petitioners, devotion to a demon lord meant transformation into a dretch, the lowest form of demonic life. From this state, a few lucky souls might climb the ranks of demon-kind and attain stronger and more influential forms. Others, especially those who had served their fiendish patron well in life, might retain their original forms, and be granted a special place beside their demonic liege.

As Hazergal recalled, a third class of petitioner also existed, those that owed no allegiance to an Abyssal lord—those who were simply wicked and chaotic enough to earn a bleak, pain-filled eternity in the Abyss. These unfortunates were known simply as the damned, and their fate was perhaps the most wretched and horrifying of all dead souls.

A damned soul was usually transformed into a larva. Mindless, worm-like creatures, larvae served a number of purposes in the Abyss. Primarily, they acted as living storage for the energy of souls, to be consumed by hungry demons or used to power all manner of fiendish devices and magic. Likely, this was what lay in store for Hazergal.

The archmage had never considered his relentless ambition for power to be evil, dismissing such arcane notions of morality as useless piffle, meant only for priests and peasants. Yet here he was, shackled to the powerless, transitive form of a petitioner, and destined for ultimate torment or—at best—complete annihilation. Although he had often fraternized with Abyssal creatures, they had always been enslaved to his will via powerful spells of conjuration. He had paid no tribute to the powerful lords of the Abyss, to whom his conjured demons might owe allegiance.

In fact, Hazergal had paid little attention, and certainly little devotion, to any divine entity, be it demon lord or deity. Throughout his long rise to power, Hazergal had relied upon no one but himself. From his beginnings in the decrepit slums of the city of Dedrish—where, as an orphan, he had survived by thievery and even murder—he had trusted nothing but his own wits and abilities. When he had claimed a position as an apprentice to a notable mage—by murdering the boy the mage had *actually* chosen to assume his identity—it was his own hand that struck the killing blow. And years later—as that same notable mage died screaming in a magical conflagration started by his own apprentice—the man who had served as Hazergal's mentor and teacher for over a decade had called out to *his* god, but died regardless.

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He had not required the guidance of any extra-planar entity to build his empire upon a barren plain of rock and scrub, nor to become one of the most powerful mages in all the world; all this was done by his own steady and confident hand. Not once had Hazergal let words of prayer or devotion pass his lips, and in all of his long ascent from street urchin to archmage, he had counted solely on his own resolve to see him through difficult situations. Until the end, it always had.

Mindful of the canny self-reliance that had served him so well in the past, Hazergal's thoughts worked feverishly to make the best of an impossible situation. Currently he could see nothing beyond the countless multitudes of petitioners, so he decided to explore a bit, hoping to gain a better perspective on his surroundings. Moving through the huddled clumps of Abyssal petitioners was slow going, but Hazergal managed to navigate through the monstrous creatures by keeping to the outskirts of the large groups and threading his way through the gaps between each one.

As Hazergal wandered, he was treated to the horrific arrival of several demon lords as they collected their "faithful" and carried them off to receive their eternal reward. Each archfiend had its own style of entrance, but all were equally terrifying and majestic. Orcus, Prince of the Undead, appeared—along with a horde of ghouls, zombies, and other undead horrors—in a greasy geyser of black smoke, his bloated, ponderous body dwarfing the feeble petitioners he had come to claim. The souls of the great fiend's followers were snatched up by the horde of walking corpses, and when all the petitioners had been gathered, Orcus and his burdened undead disappeared.

In contrast, Lamashtu, Queen of Succubi, appeared silently among her petitioners, her naked body simultaneously beautiful and hideous. A retinue of succubi and incubi followed in the demon queen's wake, grasping each of her petitioners in an arduous embrace, and then disappearing amid a cacophony of guttural, suggestive moans. As Hazergal walked, other demon lords came to collect their petitioners, and Hazergal stayed well out of sight during each appearance, lest he be carried off as well, mistaken for a follower of one of the powerful archfiends.

The plane stretched on infinitely and Hazergal walked among the seething masses of mortal petitioners for hour upon hour. His new body required neither rest nor nourishment, and his intellect was allowed to work

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unhindered by the physical limitations of the flesh. Hazergal searched his mind for everything he knew about the Abyss, and especially the gateway plane of Abrigor.

Unfortunately, the information he recalled from his mortal life was less than helpful. Nothing existed in the dim gray expanse of Abrigor but petitioners; the plane was kept clear by an edict handed down by the most powerful demon in the Abyss, Demogorgon, so-called Prince of Demons. This allowed for an uneasy truce to exist upon the plane between the fractious demon lords. Despite this truce, although there were no permanent inhabitants upon Abrigor, the occasional interloping demon would snatch a petitioner, usually one of the damned, and carry the unfortunate back to its master.

As he wandered, Hazergal attempted to speak with other petitioners, but met the same reaction every time. Even before he could open his mouth to speak, the group or individual he hoped to address would scuttle away, eyes wide with fear and loathing. They feared his status as one of the damned, as if his lack of devotion might taint their own souls. Other times, he encountered lone individuals standing well away from the other petitioners, faces frozen in eternal horror. These sorry creatures, Hazergal surmised, were likely examples of the damned, as he was. Yet unlike himself, all of the damned Hazergal encountered had been relieved of their intellects in the transition from mortal to petitioner, and could do little but shuffle about, aimlessly awaiting their doom.

Tired of the petitioners, Hazergal sat down a good distance away from the huddled groups and put his formidable mind to work. He examined his options, which were few. Although he had been a powerful mage in life, his transition from to the afterlife seemed to have robbed him of the magic he had wielded in the world of living. He was no mindless petitioner, but he knew that he was but a shadow of his former self, lacking the power to escape the Abyss or even properly defend himself.

Seeing no avenue of escape from his plight, Hazergal's thoughts turned once again to Azadan. The rage and pain he felt at the man's betrayal had grown exponentially in the hours he had spent on Abrigor. Not only had Azadan reduced all Hazergal had created to naught in a single instant, but it seemed he had also doomed his former master to what was likely a short and horrific existence, once he was noticed by one of the ever-opportunistic demon lords.

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Hazergal let his mind run fantasy after fantasy, each one featuring Azadan dying in various slow and painful ways. These gruesome images brought a faint smile to his lips, and with them came the faint glimmer of hope that he might reverse his misfortunes, in order to one day see his fantasies realized. So lost was Hazergal in his morbid daydreaming that he almost failed to notice a commotion stirring in a large group of petitioners a few hundred yards away.

Cries of abject terror erupted from the tangled mass of crying souls, as something large made its way through the cowering wall of naked flesh. Hazergal leapt to his feet and watched with growing horror as the bulky, scaled form of terror given flesh stalked from the throng and into plain view.

The creature was twelve feet of sinewy muscle wrapped in burnished, red scales, framed with two immense bat-like wings, and crowned with a head that was the birthing ground of nightmares. It was naked save for a kilt of beaten brass around its hips, from which hung a cruel, jagged-edged sword that glittered foully in the dim gray light.

Balor! Hazergal's mind howled in terror. Demons of the highest magnitude, balors were malice given flesh, some of the most feared creatures in all of the lower planes. Hazergal had encountered the beasts before, typically when he summoned them to serve his bidding. Only once in his mortal life had he ever fought such a horror, when a sorcerous rival sent one of the savage creatures against him. Hazergal had managed to slay the demon, but even at the height of his powers he had nearly been killed. Now, in his weakened state, he knew he had no chance of defeating such a monster.

The petitioners had fled the area around the balor, and the huge demon seemed to pay them no mind as he scanned the barren landscape with his piercing, hellish gaze. Hazergal stood alone not more than three hundred feet from the demon, as conspicuous as a flower blooming in a desert. Realizing his peril, Hazergal turned to flee, but in his haste his feet became tangled and he fell to the earth with a muffled grunt. The demon's massive head whipped around at the sound, and its gleaming red gaze fell upon Hazergal's prone body.

"There!" the balor bellowed. "That one!"

The demon punctuated his outburst by pointing an outstretched arm in Hazergal's direction. A high piercing screech from the west answered the balor's cry, and the shouts of more terrified petitioners rose up soon after.

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Hazergal climbed to his feet and broke into a dead run away from the balor. The demon did not give chase, but from behind, he could hear the frenzied beating of massive, feathered wings. Hazergal dared a glance back over his shoulder as he ran, and saw two dark shapes knifing through the air towards him. Two vulture-like demons—Hazergal knew them as vrocks—were bearing down on him, talons outstretched to snatch him up. Hazergal was all too familiar with this type of demon as well, and knew that even among the other fiends they were well known for their cruelty and savage inclinations.

Panic gripped Hazergal. He could not outrun the demons, and he was completely defenseless without the magic that had served him in life. The void had scrubbed every spell from his mind, and even if he were in possession of a spellbook, he doubted his feeble petitioner body could channel the arcane energies he had commanded as a mortal man. But still his panicked mind groped desperately for the words of arcane might that would unleash a torrent of magical death upon his foes—until, and much to his surprise and relief, he found them.

A spell sprang into Hazergal's mind, one that he was quite fond of, and he skidded to a halt to turn and face the onrushing demons. Hazergal's voice smote the air with magical words of power as he pointed an outstretched hand at the lead vrock. A guttural grunt completed the spell, and a shuddering line of concussive force burst from Hazergal's outstretched palm, striking the lead vrock squarely as it dove toward him.

The result of the spell was nothing short of spectacular. The line of force struck the vrock like a thunderbolt, shredding feather, flesh, and bone with an ear-shattering explosion of sound. The vrock fell from the sky like a bloody meteor, crashing to the ground in a quivering heap of pulped blood and feathers a scant ten feet from its slayer.

The second vrock wheeled away and fled back toward the balor, who stood screaming in incoherent rage at Hazergal and the remaining vrock. Hazergal wasted no time in congratulating himself, and sprinted off again. He was unsure how he had been able to cast a spell without preparation, but at this point it mattered little, as he heard the great wings of the balor stir the air as it took flight in pursuit.

Hazergal took off again at a run, but the balor was upon him in seconds. The great, scaled demon flew over his head and landed, fifty feet in front of him, with a leathery fluttering of mammoth wings. Hazergal stopped

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running, watching as the balor snatched his sword from his girdle, and began walking purposefully towards him.

Suddenly the words to another spell flowed from some mysterious magical reservoir into his mind, the sensation a cooling tide of resolve, like water to a parched thirst. Hazergal pointed his index finger at the balor, and five twisting bolts of magical force sprang from the outstretched digit. Each one struck the towering demon with unerring accuracy.

The balor stumbled back with the impact of the magical darts, each one leaving a smoking patch of burnt flesh on the demon's scaly chest. The spell did little to deter the mighty demon, however, as the balor loosed a howl of rage and broke into a ground-shaking run, his body flaring to life with a nimbus of lurid green flames. Again Hazergal turned to flee, but found his escape cut off by the other vrock, who had crept up silently behind him while he had been dealing with the balor.

Another spell sprang to his lips, but the vrock was too close, and it lashed out with a taloned foot, clubbing Hazergal on the side of his head and sending him senseless to the ground. The vrock leapt upon him, and the wizard felt its wicked claws sink into his flesh, its bulk pinning him firmly to the ground

"Don't destroy it, you fool!" the balor bellowed as he reached his vrock underling and the feebly struggling form of Hazergal beneath it. "That's the only unclaimed one we've found on this entire miserable trip."

Hazergal felt the vrock's claws recede and the pressure of its body lessen. "Put the collar on it before it can get off another spell," the balor commanded.

Casting a spell was just what Hazergal attempted to do, but the arcane words died on his lips as he felt the cool touch of metal on his neck. An iron collar was locked about his throat, and all strength fled his body immediately. Even the power of speech was now beyond him.

"There, you little blighter! Gave us quite a run for it didn't you?" Hazergal heard the vrock crow out, mocking him. He lay face down on the hard earth, unable to move. He understood the two demons as they spoke, for the tongue of the Abyss was well known to him.

"I didn't think they could do that," the vrock continued. "They usually just stand there senseless while we scoop 'em up." The vulture demon glanced over at the shattered remains of the other vrock. "He sure did for Drezekar, didn't he?"

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Hazergal felt the stifling heat of the balor's body as it bent down over him. The fiend closed his rough, taloned hand around his collared throat. The balor hauled the wizard bodily from the ground and held him at eye level, the red orbs burrowing into him as the massive hand turned him this way and that. Finally satisfied, the demon dropped Hazergal to the ground, where he lay in an immobile heap.

"No, they can't do that," the balor said. "At least not any that I've ever seen could. He *is* one of the damned though. I don't see a lord's mark on him." The balor prodded Hazergal idly with one great, clawed foot, staring down at him. "Pick him up, we shall take him with us," the balor said after a few moments, and Hazergal was once again lifted from the ground. The vrock slung him over its shoulder as the two demons began to move.

"We will take this damned to Pyrak," the balor said as the two demons made their way unchallenged through the throngs of petitioners. "Perhaps he can tell us why this one is different from the rest."

"Maybe the night hags will pay more for this one, Hedrenatherax. We could split the share that Drezekar would have gotten," the vrock cawed.

"No, we won't sell this one," the balor replied. "Although Pyrak might pay *me* for bringing him something interesting."

"*What?*" the vrock croaked. "You said equal shares, Hedrenatherax!"

Paralyzed by the collar, Hazergal could barely follow what happened next. Fierce argument seemed to spring up between the two demons as they walked, their words becoming more and more violent, until finally the debate over who would get what was decided.

Hazergal once again tumbled to the ground as the blade of the balor Hedrenatherax removed the vrock's head.

"Now you're all mine," the balor chuckled to himself, scooping up Hazergal.

The demon walked on for what seemed like hours, until finally something glittered ahead of them, a light amidst Abrigor's perpetual, gray gloom. As his lolling head bounced against the demon's shoulder, Hazergal could see that a glowing window of magical energy hung suspended in midair.

A portal, Hazergal realized. Now he knew his doom was sealed. The massive balor moved towards the egress that certainly led to the domain of an Abyssal ruler, and Hazergal resigned himself to damnation.

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Pyrak was profoundly irritated. And for such a powerful demon lord, irritation was an explosive—and lethal—state of mind.

Those familiar with fiends would easily recognize Pyrak's form: a vulture-like demon, seventeen feet tall, with a set of huge, gray wings and a sharply hooked beak the color of steel. The demon lord bore a strong resemblance to a vrock, like those who had helped capture Hazergal. In fact, Pyrak was the progenitor of the vrocks, father to an entire race of demon-kind.

Presently, the demon lord sat on a mammoth throne of black basalt, with a gargantuan sword in a plain black scabbard resting across his feathered knees. The throne dominated a long hall of white marble. The roof of the hall was supported by a row of carved ivory pillars bearing a horrific mix of leering demonic faces and bestial, cavorting figures. The domed ceiling above the throne was transparent, allowing all within a clear view of the sickly purple clouds that crawled like bloated slugs across the Abyssal sky.

At the foot of the six steps that led up to Pyrak's throne stood the sources of his irritation: two demons, favored servants, arguing with one another in increasingly volatile tones. Consumed with their incessant squabbling, the demons paid little attention to Pyrak. They did not notice the way their bickering was scraping away at the archfiend's last nerve.

The two fiends were strikingly different in form and demeanor, but of roughly equal power. Heskera, the marilith, scarred from literally thousands of battles, sat coiled upon her long serpentine body, six arms crossed over her ample bosom, and wore an expression akin to a gathering storm. She was strikingly beautiful. Long black tresses, held in place with a platinum tiara, framed her delicate features. The slightest hint of rouge, seemingly out of place on a battle-hardened demon, colored each high cheekbone. Heskera's voice was an intoxicating purr, and it mixed oddly with the sound of clashing steel, as her angry gesticulations jangled the six longswords that hung from her battle-harness.

Heskera's beautiful form was the complete antithesis of her brutish, ugly opponent. Kugrot was a nalfeshnee, a towering boar-like demon with

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apish arms and a blunt, tusked face. Two small, merciless eyes peered out from his deep sockets. Kugrot was unarmed, but far from helpless; his mighty arms and thick taloned fingers left little doubt of that.

The two demons had been arguing for the better part of an hour. Given the chaotic nature of demons, they had shown remarkable restraint, using words to make their respective points instead of tooth, claw, or blade. They stood at the foot of Pyrak's great black throne, occasionally attempting to pull the demon lord, their nominal liege, into the debate. The dulcet tones of Heskera's voice mingled horribly with the barking of Kugrot's guttural utterances. The result was a cacophonous mess of noise that ground away at Pyrak's patience, causing him to obsessively finger the hilt of his massive greatsword, a mighty enchanted blade called *Fiendbleeder*.

The debate raged over which demon was to lead the next incursion into Infernium. This plane, commonly referred to as the Nine Hells, was home to the eternal enemies of the Abyss: the devils. A regimented caste of fiends that marshaled their evil along complex and often bureaucratic lines, the stringently lawful devils—also called the Infernals—had been the determined foes of the demons of the Abyss since time began. The teeming Abyssal chaos birthed massive armies of demons, who frequently invaded the first layer of Infernium, called Avernus. There, the disorganized hordes of demons would clash against the ranks of devils, and usually be broken upon the less numerous but far more disciplined infernal lines. This cycle of conflict perpetually repeated itself. The demons would invade Infernium and be repelled, and the devils would occasionally invade the Abyss, only to be overwhelmed by the vast hordes of fiends who dwelled there.

Pyrak was absolutely devoted to bringing the war to the Nine Hells—due, in large part, to *Fiendbleeder*. A staggeringly powerful artifact with a mind and will of its own, the sword *Fiendbleeder* existed for the singular purpose of destroying devils. Over the centuries it had poisoned Pyrak's mind, until he existed for nothing but the endless war between Infernium and Abyss. The weapon's epic power allowed Pyrak to remain largely unmolested by other demon lords, who rightly feared the artifact and its wielder.

From his floating palace on the barren, windswept abyssal layer of Vrack, Pyrak commanded a host of vrocks and other demons that he frequently led into the Hells to do battle. Pyrak was much feared in Infernium, as he led his demonic armies from the front, personally smashing entire legions of devils with his gargantuan blade. He had even, on one invasion, personally

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defeated the great pit fiend Beyemon, master of Avernus, inflicting near-mortal wounds on the archdevil before his loyal retainers pulled him to safety amid the chaos of battle. In his heart Pyrak knew that the battle was futile: the planes were infinite, and the war was simply not winnable, but *Fiendbleeder* drove him on, its thirst for the blood of its hated foes nigh unquenchable.

On the rare occasions that Pyrak was unable to lead his army into Infernium, he allowed a few of his most powerful servants to act as generals in his stead. Heskera and Kugrot were two of his best, but their most recent forays had ended in complete and utter failure, resulting in the loss of thousands of demonic troops. Each of the two powerful demons was far too concerned with personal gain, and their own skin, to make any sort of competent military commander. Without Pyrak in the lead, his demonic army quickly degenerated into a wild, disorganized mob, uncontrollable and easily defeated by the orderly arrays of infernal might.

Pyrak's grip around the hilt of his greatsword tightened, the leather-wrapped hilt creaking with the pressure, as his two incompetent generals continued to debate.

"You fat, slobbering pile of dung!" Heskera screamed, all six of her arms flying out in utter exasperation. "You can barely put whole sentences together, let alone lead an army!"

Kugrot's beady eyes gleamed at Heskera's insult. "Perhaps you have forgotten my stunning victory over Medregog," the nalfeshnee sneered.

"Hah!" Heskera snorted. "Medregog!? That trumped up lemure! He practically led his entire regiment off that cliff before you ran into him. Imbeciles receive no accolades for outwitting imbeciles."

"You want to talk about lemures? Let me tell you about lemures, wench!" Kugrot barked back, a malicious grin creasing his hideous features. "I seem to recall a whole wing of vrocks destroyed by those pathetic little blobs of flesh not more than two weeks ago. Now who was leading *that* little expedition, hmm?" Kugrot tapped his warty chin, as if trying to remember a name. "Ah, yes. It was you!" the nalfeshnee spat, after taking a moment to drink in Heskera's growing rage. "Yes and on the ground as well. You do know that vrocks can *fly*, don't you?"

So engrossed in their argument were the two demons that neither of them heard *Fiendbleeder* slither from its scabbard, nor saw Pyrak rising from his throne.

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"I will cut you into a thousand pieces, you inbred dretch dropping!" Six longswords sprang into six long-nailed, manicured hands, as Heskera gave into her already unstable temper.

"Try it, you six armed slut! Just try it! I will—" Kugrot had pulled himself up to his full height, his jaws open wide to bring his mammoth tusks to bear upon Heskera. But in his rage, he failed to see the huge winged shadow looming over him until it was far too late. Wide-eyed, Kugrot whirled around just in time to meet the massive downward stroke of *Fiendbleeder.* The enchanted blade bit into his thick skull, splattering dark ichor in a wide arc, and split the nalfeshnee's head from crown to breastbone. Kugrot's savaged corpse collapsed to the ground, twitching in its death throes and leaking a widening puddle of black slime.

Pyrak's patience had finally come to an end.

The demon lord had lost his grip on *Fiendbleeder* when it lodged in Kugrot's thick breastbone. Nonetheless, he turned his flaming gaze upon Heskera, who had wisely sheathed her blades after witnessing Kugrot's fate.

"*Go. Now.*" Pyrak said, his words a harsh croak, leaving no doubt that murder was still very much in his mind.

Heskera was no fool, realizing that her life had been spared simply because Pyrak's blade had become stuck in Kugrot's corpse. After a hasty "Yes, my lord," she departed behind the muttered incantation of a teleportation spell.

It seemed Heskera had won her argument after all.

Pyrak was alone at last. He still fumed, but there were no further targets for his murderous ire, so he turned to the corpse of Kugrot and set about retrieving his sword.

As Pyrak's rage cooled, he realized that killing both of his generals would have been counter-productive to his efforts in the endless war with the Nine Hells, something he was quite certain *Fiendbleeder* was aware of. The demon lord had little doubt the sword had lodged within the corpse to keep its wielder from further damaging its chances to destroy devils. The massive blade of *Fiendbleeder* could effortlessly have cut Kugrot in two, allowing Pyrak to bring the weapon to bear on Heskera, but it had desired otherwise.

Pyrak ripped *Fiendbleeder* from Kugrot's body, and it came easily…and *willingly*. The blade was unmarred, clean, not a drop of Kugrot's foul blood staining its silvery surface. Pyrak carried his precious weapon back to his

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throne and returned it to the blackened iron sheathe he had discarded in his attack on Kugrot. He then sank back wearily into his seat, folded his great wings around his body, and sat brooding.

Pyrak stoked the sheathed *Fiendbleeder* idly, hardly conscious of the bizarre affection he lavished upon the blade. The great sword had been instrumental in his rise to power, and over the centuries it had become more than a simple tool. It was simultaneously the demon lord's most trusted ally and his most hated foe.

The sword whispered always in the back of Pyrak's mind, driving him on, pushing him to assail the Nine Hells with every ounce of strength and terror he could muster. And he complied, throwing all his resources into a war he knew was ultimately futile. Together, Pyrak and *Fiendbleeder* had earned a reputation in Infernium that struck fear in the hearts of even the mightiest pit fiend. He had managed to slay a number of powerful archdevils, bringing much personal woe and destruction upon the lords of Infernium, feats no other demon lord could lay claim to.

Pyrak's impressive legacy of victory over other powerful fiends had begun millennia earlier. He had claimed the floating fortress he now occupied from the demon lord Pazuzu, as well as the vast Abyssal plane of Vrack, which Pazuzu had also once ruled. The deposed demon lord had survived their confrontation by fleeing to the prime material plane. Since that time, Pazuzu had returned to the Abyss and was virtually the only demon lord that openly defied Pyrak. But the great Vrock was largely unconcerned with the affairs of other powerful demons. He maintained pacts of non-aggression with various Abyssal lords, including Orcus, Lamashtu, and Dagon. In truth, Pyrak was concerned only with the conquest of Infernium and appeasing *Fiendbleeder*.

The lord of Vrack was suddenly pulled from his brooding by a heavy fist rapping on the giant silver and adamantine doors that led to his throne room.

"Enter!" Pyrak barked, irritated at the disturbance.

The massive double doors swung open soundlessly to admit the terrible scaly form of the balor Hedrenatherax, Pyrak's major domo. The huge demon stalked directly up to the throne, its arms cradling a small humanoid whose limbs dangled limply from its iron grasp.

From above his massive folded wings, Pyrak's eyes narrowed at his second in command, as the balor stood at the base of the steps and waited

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for his lord's acknowledgement. Pyrak made him wait, noting with pleasure how Hedrenatherax's gaze fastened on the shattered body of Kugrot, whose bloated corpse emitted an overpowering stench as it leaked an expanding pool of congealing ichor.

Finally, bored with making Hedrenatherax squirm, Pyrak unfolded his wings to reveal *Fiendbleeder* once again in its customary place across his knees, within easy reach. "Hedrenatherax. I hope you have not disturbed me needlessly. I am in a foul mood." Pyrak punctuated his statement with a glance at what remained of Kugrot.

"Never liked him much anyway," Hedrenatherax said with a shrug, as if unfazed by Kugrot's demise. "I brought you something I think you will find interesting."

"What? That little maggot you've got there? Take it to the night hags, I have no use for it."

"I know it looks like just another one of the damned, but this one is different. And dangerous," Hedrenatherax said, unceremoniously dumping Hazergal's limp body onto the cold stones of the throne room.

"Dangerous? Hah!" Pyrak snorted. "The damned are mindless drones, fit only for consumption or the spawning pits. How could one possibly be dangerous?"

"Well, he did for one of my vrocks with a spell. Shredded the feathery bugger in midair," Hedrenatherax replied. "I think this one was a mage on the prime, and I think he can still do everything he could do when he was a mortal."

Pyrak regarded his balor servant skeptically. Hedrenatherax was not known for his intellect, and in fact was regarded as quite dull for a balor. "This sounds like dretch dung to me, Hedrenatherax. What happened to the other vrock I sent with you,' Pyrak asked, noting that Hedrenatherax had only accounted for *one* of the vrocks that had accompanied him to Abrigor.

"Dead. Killed by this little blighter here," Hedrenatherax said. The falsehood hung in the air like a foul vapor, obvious and feeble.

Pyrak began to rise from the throne in response to the pathetic lie, his fingers closing about the hilt of *Fiendbleeder.* There was murder in the demon lord's eyes.

Then, all at once, the gleam of rage melted away, and Pyrak's great red orbs went suddenly glassy. He settled back in his throne, his grip relaxing

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on his weapon. "Very well," he said. "Tell me what happened." The demon lord's voice was distant and unfocused.

The sword has him again, Hedrenatherax surmised, disgusted that a demon lord as mighty as Pyrak could be controlled in such a way. Yet he was grateful for the reprieve *Fiendbleeder* had granted him, for if the sword was interested in what he had to say, then Pyrak would soon be as well.

Hedrenatherax recounted the short but deadly battle with Hazergal that had resulted in the destruction of the vrock Drezekar. The balor expanded his tale to include a fabricated account of the second vrock's destruction, and greatly increased his own role in the battle.

Pyrak's mind had apparently been returned to him at some point during Hedrenatherax's story, and the mighty demon lord now wore a look of pointed interest. He sat silent for a few moments after the balor had stopped speaking.

"I had thought it impossible for a petitioner, especially one of the damned, to retain anything from their mortal lives. But it seems that may not be true," Pyrak said. "Perhaps this one is simply an anomaly, but nevertheless, it does present an interesting opportunity."

"What do you want me to do with it, lord?"

"Take him to the spawning pits," Pyrak replied. "If he truly is as powerful as you say, I do not wish him to run amok within my demesne. Perhaps he will emerge from the pits as something more than a dretch. If so, we can always put him to use against the Infernals."

Hedrenatherax knew he had likely been spared a very messy death, and did not argue with his master. "Very well, I will take him to the pits of Gemnez Drak, immediately. I will report to you if anything unusual occurs."

"Good. Now leave me," Pyrak dismissed his major domo with a wave of his taloned hand and folded his wings about his body again, returning instantly to his brooding and the languid mental caress of *Fiendbleeder.*

Hedrenatherax stalked from the throne room, Hazergal in tow, and took wing from one of the lofty parapets of Pyrak's floating fortress. With a few beats of his mighty wings the balor was streaking across the barren Abyssal landscape toward a soft green luminescence on the horizon.

Hazergal had heard and understood every word spoken in Pyrak's throne room. He roiled in impotent panic, locked helpless within his own mind by the magic of the collar. As Hedrenatherax flew, Hazergal lolled

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like a broken doll the balor's grip. His brain rushed to piece together the information he had gleaned in Pyrak's throne room. It did not take long for Hazergal's extensive knowledge of planar lore and demonology to grant him a firm understanding of what awaited him in Gemnez Drak.

Damned petitioners not transformed into larvae were cast into the boiling quagmire of the Abyssal spawning pits. The fell magic contained within the primordial ooze would transform a petitioner into a demon, usually a dretch or at best a quasit. But many of those cast into the pits were simply destroyed by the brutal alchemical transmutation, their souls erased, their existence snuffed out forever.

Helpless, Hazergal watched the lurid, organic glow on the horizon grow larger, as his captor sped through the air towards the spawning pit of Gemnez Drak, and what was likely the end of all he had known and fought for.

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The words to a dozen mighty spells flooded Hazergal's mind as he hung limp in the demon Hedrenatherax's grasp, speeding across the barren Abyssal landscape. But even as he approached ever closer to what was almost certainly his doom, the power of the magical collar around his neck kept his lips sealed and his sorcery at bay. The wizard cursed himself for not devoting more time to the secrets of casting spells without incantations or arcane gestures. Now, his need for such verbal and somatic components to work his magic held him in complete impotence.

As they flew, Hedrenatherax chattered idly to his silent prisoner, regaling the petitioner with the inconceivable horrors that awaited him in Gemnez Drak. The balor thrived on such torment, but it had little effect on Hazergal. He was quite beyond the point of simple terror. His mind had reached a place of quiet resignation. He would either be destroyed or assume the form of a demon. Whichever it was, what was left of Hazergal the man would be snuffed out completely.

If he were destroyed, then the cold eternity of nonexistence would assuage his fear and suffering. If he became a demon, he would likely remember nothing of his former life, and therefore he, Hazergal, would simply cease to exist. Either way, the pain and mental anguish of his last days would be erased.

The green luminance on the horizon grew larger as Hedrenatherax winged through the sky. Soon the demon's helpless prisoner could make out the details of his final destination. They were approaching a seemingly endless range of mountains that lifted skywards in twisted peaks of black granite and quartz. The mountains broke up the flat and monotonous landscape that made up the demon lord Pyrak's domain, serving as a boundary between his Abyssal layer and that of Shuvon Dreth, an enigmatic archfiend who ruled the layer beyond.

Then Hazergal caught his first look at the horror that was Gemnez Drak. The spawning pit was an immense lake of frothing green liquid, contained in a bowl-shaped depression atop the flattened summit of the highest peak. Arranged around the lake were a number of small stone

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buildings, including a massive fortress. It squatted like a great, fat gargoyle on a large outcropping of stone that jutted over the pit itself. Beneath the castle, the repulsive effluvium of the spawning pit bubbled and churned, emitting an indescribably foul odor that assailed Hazergal's nostrils despite his lofty vantage point.

Hedrenatherax circled in slow, tightening loops as he descended towards the seething pit. As they neared the ground, Hazergal was able to pick out more than a dozen horrid, demonic figures moving around the pit's edge. These tall, skeletal, black-skinned demons wielded long lances of silvery metal, with which they occasionally prodded unseen shapes beneath the surface of the bubbling green lake.

Hedrenatherax touched down before the black iron gate of the giant fortress. The huge balor strode up to the gates unchallenged, glaring at the two demonic guards that stood near the entrance. The guards were the same variety of demon Hazergal had glimpsed around the spawning pit: tall skeletal creatures whose leathery black skin glistened with reddish slime. The demons' nightmarish heads resembled wickedly fanged skulls, each with a single jutting horn. Hazergal recognized them as babau, or horned demons, a common form of fiend, vicious but not terribly powerful.

The two babau sprang to open the gate for Hedrenatherax, bowing and scraping as they did, not wanting to provoke the ire of the powerful demon. Hazergal was dragged toward a large square courtyard, then into a vision straight from the mind of a madman. The courtyard was filled with a jumble of bones, both humanoid and demon. Some had bits of putrefying flesh still holding nearly complete skeletons together.

Hedrenatherax's massive footfalls crunched through this osseous abattoir as he moved towards a second set of gates that led into the keep proper.

In the center of the courtyard was a massive fountain, constructed of a spongy dark rock that Hazergal could not identify. The fountain spewed a blackish ichor into the air from a highly detailed carving of a human man apparently being devoured by an immense tentacled demon. The human's body was engulfed chest deep in the stone demon's maw, and his exquisitely sculpted features were frozen in an open-mouthed scream of horror and pain. The black fluid shot from the sculpture's mouth to fall in a rain of stinking slime before collecting in a large basin beneath.

A horde of short hairless demons clustered naked around the fountain, eagerly lapping up the viscous fluid or gnawing on the discarded bones

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that littered the area. The small demons were strikingly pathetic, with flat, sloped heads, small beady eyes, and wide mouths filled with crooked fangs. Their eyes gleamed dully as they fought amongst themselves to get closer to the fountain and its foul contents.

Dretches. Hazergal recognized the diminutive fiends instantly, the lowliest of demon kind. He had often used them for menial tasks and drudgery; they were awesomely stupid and practically useless as combatants, even in huge numbers.

Hedrenatherax barked a curse in abyssal at the mewling horde of lesser demons and they scattered in terror at his approach.

"Out of my way you bloody, useless maggots!" Hedrenatherax thundered, slashing a dretch in two with a single stroke of his massive jagged-edged sword, as it turned, too slowly, to flee. The remaining dretches retreated into the farthest corner of the courtyard, cowering and trying to hide beneath one another in a pathetic pile of wriggling demonic flesh.

Hedrenatherax chuckled cruelly as he moved toward the inner gates, where there stood another—far more formidable—guardian. It is said that the Abyss is infinite, that the multitudes of demon-kind defy any attempts at cataloguing or categorization. Hazergal had no reason to doubt the truth of this saying, as the demon that guarded the inner gates to the fortress of Gemnez Drak was completely unknown to him.

Hulking before the black iron gates was the largest demon Hazergal had ever seen. Towering over twenty-five feet tall, the giant fiend seemed the living personification of strength, brutality, and destruction. Two small dull eyes stared out from a mammoth head reminiscent of a bison's, with two long goring horns. The gargantuan humanoid's body was chorded with layer upon layer of rock-hard muscle and sinew, all covered in a thin layer of dirty brown fur. The demon stood slightly hunched, its huge thick-fingered fists dragging the ground on the end of its powerful arms. As Hedrenatherax drew closer, the giant demon took up a huge cold-iron maul that lay propped against the gates and glared menacingly down at the balor and his prisoner.

Hedrenatherax had so far exhibited nothing but unbridled arrogance, yet Hazergal could see his hesitation at the sight of the massive fiend.

"I have the watch word, Uzog!" the balor shouted up to the hulking demon.

Uzog's bison-like head obviously contained little intellect. Hazergal

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watched a mental struggle of epic proportions take place behind its dull, glazed eyes as it fought to process Hedrenatherax's words. Finally, after what seemed like minutes of brutal cogitation, the massive demon lowered its maul and spoke two words.

"Show word!" Uzog bellowed, its thick, coarse voice echoing off the four walls of the courtyard, sending the dretches who still huddled near the front gates into renewed cowering.

Hedrenatherax wasted no time in presenting his credentials. He hastily tossed Hazergal's limp form to the ground to free both his hands. The balor muttered a quick incantation and began to trace a glowing glyph in the air with the taloned index finger of his right hand. Once he had finished, the glyph persisted for a few seconds as Uzog squinted down at it, attempting to match the symbol with the one burned into his brain by the master of Gemnez Drak.

At length, the huge fiend emitted a thick snort of satisfaction and turned to the inner gates, wrenching them open with one hand. Hedrenatherax scooped up Hazergal and returned him to his former position, flung across the balor's shoulder. He then hurried through the aperture that led to the inner keep.

Hazergal vaguely perceived traversing a multitude of stairs as his balor captor climbed to the upper levels of the structure. Black walls featuring leering, twisted faces stared out at the helpless petitioner. Some of these faces actually moved; some even screamed.

Unable to shut his eyes against the alien horror of the keep, Hazergal focused once again on his rage, filling his mind with the face of Azadan. As it had done before, his thirst for vengeance warded him against the relentless chaos of the Abyss, allowing him to keep a tight grip on what remained of his sanity. Hazergal was so fixated upon his hate that he scarcely noticed when Hedrenatherax stopped moving and stood before a huge set of ornate double doors.

Hedrenatherax pushed open the gilded doors and entered a room as bizarre as anything Hazergal had witnessed in his short time in the Abyss. The reek of a heavy, noxious perfume was the first thing to assail Hazergal's senses as he was carried into a room that appeared one part harem and one part torture chamber.

The room was large, its vaulted ceiling painted with scenes of cavorting demons engaged in all manner of foul perversions. Arranged around the

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chamber was a bizarre array of torture devices, each operated by a darkly beautiful demoness. Hazergal recognized the demonesses as succubi, supernaturally alluring demons often called upon to tempt mortals into damnation. Each of the torture instruments, from the rack to far more creative machines, held a humanoid petitioner from whom the succubi were skillfully extracting both anguished screams and moans of pleasure.

In the center of the chamber, squatting like a huge toad on a pile of cushions, was the master of Gemnez Drak. The fiend was easily as large as Uzog, but its bloated corpulent form lacked the awe-inspiring physique of the gate guardian. Huge drooping rolls of fat hung from the creature's bulbous form. Two stubby arms ended in thick, sausage-fingered hands, each sporting five long sharp talons painted an outrageous licorice red. The fiend's legs were not visible, hidden beneath the mound of pillows and its own massive girth.

As they entered, the master of Gemnez Drak turned its attention from one of the many torture victims to its newly arrived guests. Its head was revoltingly absurd. Its oblong skull was covered in thick green scales and bisected by a wide toothy maw. Two slitted orange eyes peered out from beneath a heavy brow, each gleaming with a terrible intelligence. Such horrific features were hardly unique among demon kind, but it was the addition of what seemed to be self-applied alterations that made the master of Gemnez Drak so bizarre.

The great monstrosity's face was coated in enough painting to make a harlot blush. A bright shimmering blue accented the lid of each reptilian eye, while spots of rouge darkened each heavy jowled cheek. Most ridiculous of all was the crimson pigment that coated each cracked scaled lip, forming an almost clown-like grin in the middle of that terrible face. Despite its appearance, the huge fiend emanated a palpable aura of might and confidence. Hazergal had no doubt that he was in the presence of a powerful demon.

The massive fiend grinned wide as Hedrenatherax approached its makeshift throne, rows of shark-like teeth, between gaudy crimson lips.

"Ahh…Hedrenatherax, how splendid to see you again. What is it you have brought old Gemnez?" The creature's voice was a husky feminine purr.

"Nothing for you, *Infernal*, " Hedrenatherax spat the last word out as if it had bitten his tongue. But what shocked Hazergal more than Hedrenatherax's disrespect to the obviously potent fiend was that he

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had called it *Infernal*, a devil. Bitter enemies since the beginning of time, demons and devils had fought a near eternal war, each trying to completely eliminate the other. How could a devil, even one of Gemnez's obvious power, survive in the very home of its most hated enemy?

"I wish only to use the pit," Hedrenatherax continued. "My lord Pyrak commands it." The last statement was pointed, in the obvious certainty that it would not be denied. As perilous as Hazergal's situation was, he wondered what fostered the arrogance the balor showed in the face of this mighty devil.

Rage clouded Gemnez's bestial features at Hedrenatherax's gall, but it passed quickly, and the devil regained his composure almost at once. "Well, I could hardly deny my benefactor, the great and noble Pyrak. For where would I be—a vagabond, an outcast from my own people— if it were not for the endless generosity of our mighty liege?"

Hedrenatherax ignored the sarcasm, reaching down to reclaim Hazergal from the floor where he'd left him. The petitioner had been dropped face up this time, able to see and hear the entire exchange. He was intrigued by the implications of a demon lord such as Pyrak harboring a renegade devil. The fear of destruction was replaced, for the moment, by curiosity at how this bizarre alliance had occurred.

"Fine. I will place this petitioner in the pit myself. Our business is done." Hedrenatherax threw Hazergal over his shoulder and turned dismissively to leave.

"Wait, demon." Gemnez said softly as the balor made for the exit. "Indulge my curiosity if you would?"

Hedrenatherax halted, and turned again towards Gemnez. "Very well, toad. Speak your mind."

Gemnez ignored the balor's barb with effort. It appeared he was not used to such treatment from lesser beings. "Why would Pyrak command his mightiest servant to carry a single petitioner to the pits? I have never taken less than one hundred from his majesty, what is so special about this one?"

Hedrenatherax gave a sour chuckle. "Come and find out, fat one. I am sure Pyrak will not care."

Gemnez suddenly heaved his tremendous bulk from his mountain of cushions. He was truly a massive creature, nearly fifteen feet tall and just as wide. Hazergal had little doubt that if it were not for Pyrak's dominion

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over this place, the balor would not dare be so disrespectful. The massive spiked chain looped around Gemnez's middle, hidden by his rolls of fat when seated, left little doubt that the rogue devil was not all diplomacy and acquiescence

Gemnez waddled over to Hedrenatherax, each footfall shaking the very foundations of the keep. "May I?' Gemnez asked, reaching out a huge red nailed hand.

"Certainly, oh mighty Infernal," Hedrenatherax purred with venomous mockery.

Suddenly lifted into the air, Hazergal was held before Gemnez's awful painted face. The devil stared intently at him, his brow furrowed in concentration. After a few moments, he handed the limp body back to Hedrenatherax. "I detect nothing unusual about this petitioner. Perhaps if you remove his collar I might be able to divine more."

'Hah!" Hedrenatherax snorted. "I am not about to eat another volley of magical darts from this little maggot. He's already killed two of my underlings."

"What nonsense is this, demon?" Gemnez said skeptically. "A petitioner cannot cast spells."

"This one *can,*" Hedrenatherax said. "Pyrak wants to see what the pit will do to it. Probably just melt it into slag, or maybe make a dretch out of it."

Gemnez scratched his three chins. "A spellcasting petitioner. How odd. I find myself curious, demon. Therefore I will accompany you and see for myself what can be made of Pyrak's 'anomaly'." Gemnez held his hand out towards the double doors that led from his pleasure room, an indication that Hedrenatherax should lead the way.

Hazergal was dragged once again through Gemnez's horrible keep, finally exiting through the inner gates and out into the terrible bone filled courtyard. Gemnez had followed Hedrenatherax, and as they passed into the courtyard he bellowed an order to the bison-headed gate guardian. "Uzog! Follow!" The huge demon did as he was asked and lumbered along after Gemnez and Hedrenatherax.

The three fiends walked through the outer gates, moving around the courtyard wall and eventually behind the keep. There, a large finger of rock stretched as a narrow stone causeway over the festering pit of Gemnez Drak.

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Gemnez stopped at the base of the causeway. The narrow pathway did not seem likely to support his bulk. "There you are, demon. The pit is yours."

Hedrenatherax wasted no time. He stalked out onto the causeway, carrying the petitioner to the edge and dangling him over the heaving lake of slime. "Well, maggot, lets see what happens," the balor said with a grin.

Finally faced with what would most certainly be his end, one way or another, Hazergal's steel resolve finally failed. He was overcome with utter panic and desperation. But the collar about his neck held him helpless, and as spell after useless spell flashed into his mind, Hedrenatherax loosed his grip. Hazergal fell.

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Hazergal watched with the slow gaze of the doomed as Hedrenatherax released his grip and the irresistible force of gravity drew him down towards the churning cauldron of foulness. Unable to scream, unable to even wave his arms in impotent panic, the former arch-mage plummeted fifty feet to the surface of the spawning pit, pierced its slimy semi-translucent skin, and disappeared beneath the bubbling morass of green filth.

Perched gargoyle-like on the rock causeway above, Hedrenatherax stared down at where Hazergal had submerged. The balor wore a cold, curious grin as he waited for the petitioner to resurface. Behind Hedrenatherax, Gemnez had cautiously moved out onto the causeway to join him. The devil maneuvered his huge bulk with surprising nimbleness, gingerly sliding out to the edge of the causeway.

"You do know this can take awhile?" Gemnez said as he looked out over the pit to where Hazergal had disappeared.

"Yes, I know that, devil!" Hedrenatherax snapped. "I want to make sure he stays in there. The pit will destroy his collar, and I have no desire to experience another barrage of spells from the little blighter."

"Very well, I can place a guard until he emerges, if you wish," the rotund devil offered. He grinned. "I would not want to keep you from serving your master. Pyrak no doubt has use of such a capable minion."

"Hah!" Hedrenatherax snorted. "Save your flattery, toad. I am not leaving until that little bastard comes out of the pit. *That* is what Pyrak wants me to do."

"Very well, wait as long as you like, demon. I shall return to my keep. I find the vapors from the pit unpleasant." Gemnez put one clawed hand to his forehead, a bizarrely feminine gesture, as if he were a dainty noblewoman coming down with a headache. The huge demon then turned and moved carefully away from the lip of the causeway. He headed back towards his keep, his heavy thudding footfalls fading quickly under the churning noise of the spawning pool. Hedrenatherax said nothing as the devil departed, continuing his vigil over the pit.

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Below the surface of the acidic pool of filth, Hazergal was experiencing pain beyond what he thought possible. Every particle of his etheric, petitioner's body seemed to be on fire. As he opened his mouth to scream, the vile fluid of the pit flowed into his mouth and burned a choking path of agony to the core of his very soul. The collar that had made him helpless had fallen away—actually, had been eaten away by the horrid vitriol. But even freed of the collar's binding, Hazergal could do little but writhe and convulse as he sank to the bottom.

Blind, deaf, and wracked by powerful magic, Hazergal's mind began slipping away into a maelstrom of pain. He felt the hunger of the spawning pool devouring his memories and personality. Whatever foul process the spawning pool was enacting upon his new spiritual body, it sought to replace the well ordered harmony of his mind with the chaotic malice of a demon.

Rage surged within Hazergal as he fought the theft of his being. As he had in his descent to the Abyss, he clung to each and every slight and defeat ever dealt to him in his long, long life. From his apprenticeship under the cruel mage in Dedrish, to his final betrayal at the hands of Azadan, Hazergal pushed each disappointment and failure to the front of his mind, creating an impenetrable barrier of emotional outrage that kept the spawning pool's hungry transmutative energies at bay.

Hazergal's rage was very effective in preserving his mind, but had no effect on the changes being wrought upon his body. Bones cracked. Flesh melted and was stripped away. The agony seemed endless as the Abyss remade Hazergal into something more suitable to its hellish environs. His body was wrenched and twisted, and Hazergal could do nothing but writhe helplessly on the bottom of the spawning pool, clinging feebly to his anchor of rage.

The pain reached a maddening crescendo as the alkaline fluid of Gemnez Drak ate away the last of his skin. But eventually, Hazergal felt strength and stability return to his body. Though still blind, he pushed himself off the bottom of the pool towards the surface. Spells flooded into his mind as he neared the dim light above. Despite the immeasurable pain, Hazergal gritted his teeth and recovered the depths of concentration he had learned as a mortal mage.

As Hazergal's head broke the surface of the spawning pool, he pulled in a great lungful of stale Abyssal air and spoke the words of power that

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triggered a spell of flight. Hazergal felt his body buoyed by magical force and shot from the pool. He stopped fifty feet from the surface to hover directly parallel to the stone causeway on which stood a stunned Hedrenatherax.

There, hanging in the air, the former archmage saw—for the first time—the full extent of the changes that had been wrought upon his body.

The long clean lines of his human form had been compacted into a short, saggy-fleshed monstrosity. Long spindly arms hung down to the spade-clawed feet of his new form, and his hands, his wonderful dexterous hands, were now little more than twisted talons, good for little but the crudest manipulation.

Horror dawned cold and raw as he realized what he had become: Hazergal, mightiest wizard of Othregard, was a dretch.

Hazergal had little time to lament his transmogrification. The balor Hedrenatherax had recovered from his stupor and drawn his massive, jagged-edged sword. He spread his wings and vaulted into the air, his body suddenly wreathed in flickering greenish fire.

Hazergal knew that he had no chance against the demon on the wing. He withdrew over the center of the pit while he desperately searched his mind for a spell that would at least halt the demon.

Hedrenatherax barreled towards Hazergal, his huge sword gleaming, bestial features curled in a fanged sneer. All along, the balor had secretly hoped that Hazergal would emerge from the pit with his power intact; he wanted to avenge himself for the slight dealt to him on Abrigor.

Naturally resistant to the spells of mortals, Hedrenatherax worried little about what spell the pathetic hovering dretch might throw at him. He doubted he could be seriously harmed by anything.

The newly formed dretch splayed out both spindly taloned hands in front of its flabby sack-like body and uttered the words to a spell, a spell which the balor thought he knew. Hedrenatherax believed it would create a cone of searing fire, and no flame could burn a balor. He surged forward, expecting an effect to which he was completely immune. His surprise was near total when, instead of flame, a shuddering cone of pure, thunderous *sound* burst from the dretch's outstretched talons and struck the charging balor like a battering ram.

To the babau demons watching from the ground it seemed that Hedrenatherax had simply run into an invisible wall. A wall with teeth. The

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balor was stopped cold in mid-flight, his huge bat wings flaring out against the terrible strain of the disruption cone, but they could not hold. The delicate stretched membrane of each wing was shredded into useless tatters.

Despite the ruin of his relatively vulnerable wings, Hedrenatherax was largely uninjured by the spell. Nevertheless, unable to keep himself aloft, he plummeted like a flaming green meteor towards the pit of Gemnez Drak. The demon loosed one mighty howl of rage before he hit the surface of the spawning pool and disappeared into the hissing green fluid. For the moment, the balor was defeated.

Hazergal had no illusions that a dip in the spawning pit would do any lasting harm to the powerful demon. He turned, intending to speed away toward the keep and the looming chain of black mountains beyond. But Hazergal found he was not completely out of harm's way, as he twisted convulsively to avoid a spear-like object that narrowly missed him.

One of the babau on the ground had hurled a silvery lance at the archmage-turned-dretch. Hazergal felt the acrid burn of rage build within him once again, and he chose to loose his ire upon the dozen or so clustered babau on the ground below.

The former wizard summoned a rapid succession of spells as he streaked down at the offending demons. He layered his new body in a protective mesh of arcane energy that repelled the hurled spears of the remaining babau easily. When he was within thirty feet of the now-panicked fiends, Hazergal unleashed the full extent of his destructive repertoire.

The spells flowed into his mind with an ease he could scarcely believe. He needed no spell book; he plucked each spell like a well-ripened fruit from what seemed an endless grove. The babau disappeared in a maelstrom of magical fire and acid, their own feeble spells reflecting harmlessly off the sturdy array of magical defenses Hazergal had erected. The battle took only seconds, and when it was over, a lowly dretch hovered triumphantly over the shattered bodies of fifteen babau.

Hazergal wasted no time in celebrating his victory. He flew off, over the keep and towards the mountains. The former archmage had no idea how long this apparently limitless array of arcana would remain his to access, and wished to be as far away from the pit of Gemnez Drak as possible before he ran out of spells.

As Hazergal fled, he looked back and was relieved to see that there was no pursuit. He descended, reducing his altitude so that the various peaks

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and valleys of the mighty black mountain range would hide him from aerial pursuers. Safe for the moment, Hazergal took some time to examine his new form.

He was less than pleased.

His hairless skin was now a sickly greenish-gray, suggestive of rotting meat, and it emitted a foul oily stench. Much shorter than his human body had been, Hazergal's new frame was a bulbous sack of doughy flesh that barely topped four feet in height. His arms were long and triple jointed, but thin as stovepipes and altogether ungainly in appearance. Short stubby legs dangled beneath Hazergal as he flew, and he had serious doubts that they could carry him faster than a brisk walk. He thanked the gods he did not have a mirror, for his terrible suspicions regarding his face and head were too horrid to confront.

Despite his less than perfect new body, Hazergal found that his mind was completely intact. In fact, he felt more clearheaded now than he ever had when alive.

His thoughts flowed strangely, organized as if he had *two* minds. His mundane thoughts and base bodily functions were contained in one area of his consciousness, it seemed, an area completely separated from his knowledge of magic and the arcane. This second mind was a huge catalogue of spells, accessed as easily as opening a well indexed book. It seemed that nearly every spell he had ever cast was there, from the fireballs and lightning bolts he had used so often, to more obscure incantations he had utilized but once in his mortal life. However, the mightiest of spells, those he had learned late in his rise to power, were somehow blocked, and he was unable to access them.

Having plumbed the depths of this strange new mind, Hazergal now put it to work attempting puzzle out his bizarre situation. This exercise proved baffling, for beyond his fierce will and thirst for vengeance, he could not divine a reason for his unique existence. He held the might of a powerful spellcaster in the useless, flabby body of a dretch. It was a cosmic joke of epic proportions, but he was alive, and free. This at least was something, and from what he knew of demon-kind he would likely have all eternity to ponder his odd existence.

Hazergal's flight spell had run its course while he was lost in thought, and he found himself drifting slowly to the ground. He was in a small canyon. There was a stream of blackish fluid that Hazergal surmised could

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be anything but water. The canyon seemed deserted, but the dretch mage proceeded cautiously. The wilds of the Abyss, he knew, teemed with many dangers.

Hazergal followed the stream north, until it disappeared under a wall of black stone. This was the mountainside that marked the northern end of the canyon. Panning his gaze up the side of the mountain face, Hazergal saw a dark aperture that yawned some thirty feet above his head. The cave seemed large enough to admit his small frame, and would certainly be safer than staying out in the open.

Hazergal once again called upon his magic and cast a simpler spell, one that allowed him to scale the side of the mountain like an insect. He reached the cave entrance quickly and ducked inside without hesitation. The darkness of the cavern was of no consequence, for Hazergal found that his demon eyes pierced the gloom as easily as a well-stoked lantern.

The cave was shallow, ending a mere twenty feet from its entrance, but it was empty.

Hazergal heaved a great sigh of relief and collapsed in a heap against the back wall of his safe haven. His weariness was purely mental. He felt no hunger or fatigue in his demon body and surmised that he would need very little in the way of food or rest to survive.

Alive and in full command of his spells, Hazergal felt the first seeds of hope find purchase in his soul. Perhaps his transformation into a demon would play to his advantage; there was certainly power for the taking in the wild and endless depths of the Abyss. He had built an empire before, starting with much less than he had now. He saw no reason why he could not do so again.

Hazergal's mind began to work, as it always had, examining and discarding various scenarios and plans, pounding out a path to power where none had existed before. And there in the dark, in a small cave surrounded by the limitless chaos of the Abyss, the first flames of the greatness to come sparked and flared into life.

* * * * *

The great devil Gemnez stomped up to the lip of his spawning pool and glared at its bubbling green surface. Behind him, a troop of babau demons stood holding twelve-foot lances of silvery metal.

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Gemnez turned and barked an order at the group of lesser demons. "Find him!"

The babau jumped to obey their master and hurried to the lip of the pit, fanning out to space themselves evenly around its circumference. The demons began probing beneath the surface of the boiling green lake with their lances, abject terror creasing their frightful features. They had no desire to find anything, especially something that could survive a dip in the spawning pit.

The babau searched for a scant few minutes before one of them had the misfortune of finding what it was looking for.

Gemnez watched a few yards away as the lances of his babau servitors probed the depths of the pit. Suddenly, one of the tall black demons stopped what it was doing and motioned his master closer. It appeared that his lance had struck something solid. Before Gemnez could take a step, the surface of the lake around the lance erupted in a fountain of burning slime, and a huge bat winged shape burst from the morass.

The babau opened his fanged maw to shout for help, but was quickly silenced by the flashing stroke of Hedrenatherax's jagged sword. The babau was cut neatly in half at the midsection, its foul black blood spewing in a wide arc.

The great balor stepped from the spawning pit, a seething engine of rage and destruction. His immersion in the pool had not changed him, for he was already at the pinnacle of demon-kind. Instead, the strong vitriolic fluid had burned him horribly, blackening his flesh and dissolving many of the iron hard scales that covered his body. Hedrenatherax's wings were almost completely destroyed, the damage done to them by Hazergal's spell compounded by the acrid effluvium of the spawning pit. They hung in shreds and tatters from his broad back, useless and broken.

Hedrenatherax was beyond reason and he turned his burning gaze on the remaining babau cowering behind the massive bulk of Gemnez. Hedrenatherax surged forward, bellowing, his great blade held in both hands. He wanted revenge for the outrage and humiliation dealt him by Hazergal, and he had little concern who or what was the recipient of this vengeance.

Gemnez waited for the balor to close, a slight grin on his gaudy reptilian face. When the balor saw that Gemnez was blocking his way, he turned his full ire upon the massive devil, raising his sword above his head to cleave Gemnez's great bloated body. The babau fell back in terror as

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Hedrenatherax closed the distance between himself and their master.

As the huge balor drew within striking distance, Gemnez uncoiled like a great fat serpent, catching Hedrenatherax's descending sword arm by the wrist with his left hand while his right shot out and clasped the balor firmly about the neck. With a deft twist of the balor's captured wrist, Gemnez sent the balor's blade flying from his taloned hand. He then lifted Hedrenatherax off the ground with one mighty heave, and then slammed him back down, pinning the demon beneath a mountain of infernal flesh.

The speed and accuracy displayed by the Gemnez caught everyone by surprise, especially Hedrenatherax, who now lay trapped at the mercy of the mighty fiend. The balor struggled frantically, but found that his own strength was woefully insufficient to counter that of his foe. Helpless, the balor ceased his struggling as the rage left him in the face of total defeat.

Gemnez pushed his face close to Hedrenatherax's and whispered venomously in his ear. "Now listen to me, you great reeking pile of lemure dung," Gemnez seethed. "If you harm another of my servants, I will send you back to Pyrak in the bellies of a hundred dretches."

Hedrenatherax stared up at the ludicrous painted face of Gemnez with complete shock and disbelief.

"If you will behave yourself, I will release you," Gemnez continued. "Will you behave, demon?" the devil asked pointedly, his glaring orange eyes promising instant destruction.

"Yes. Let me up toad!" Hedrenatherax managed to bark, his feeble bravado bringing a grin to Gemnez's scaled lips.

Gemnez suddenly bent close to Hedrenatherax and placed a great, wet, red-smeared kiss on the balor's forehead. "Good demon," he said and rose, freeing the balor from beneath his body.

Hedrenatherax didn't move for a few seconds, his outrage and shame holding him in a vise of impotent misery. It took every ounce of his will not to fly into incoherent rage, but somehow the balor managed it, and climbed slowly to his feet. He retrieved his sword, but wisely left it to hang at his side.

"Now what?" the balor asked, obviously expecting more violence.

"Now we talk," Gemnez answered. "We have much to discuss you and I. Much to discuss about a faithless petitioner that can best a balor in single combat." The barb was unmistakable. Hedrenatherax bristled, but held his anger in check.

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"Come now. Let us walk," Gemnez offered, holding one huge flabby arm out, allowing the balor to lead the way. The two powerful fiends strode off, leaving the greatly relieved cadre of babau behind, their voices echoing softly over the churning cacophony of the pit.

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Pyrak leaned upon the hilt of his massive sword and cast his gaze across a scorched landscape. No sun hung over the cracked earth and heat-baked rock. Instead, the hellish place was lit by a fierce reddish glow. It cast deep shadows, like pools of thickening blood. Behind the demon lord, a shimmering disc of multicolored light hung suspended in the heat-choked air. It was portal, one of the magical doorways that lit the lower planes. This portal was large, easily large enough to allow Pyrak to fit his massive frame through without stooping.

Alone for the moment, Pyrak scanned the horizon for any sign of enemies, for he stood upon the land of his most hated foe: Avernus, the first level of Infernium. The very gates of Hell.

A harsh jangling of steel announced the arrival of Pyrak's general, Heskera. The sound was made by the marilith's battle harness, and weapons, as the portal disgorged her serpentine body. The demoness's beautiful features were hard and pinched. She was nervous, and had good reason to be.

The marilith had been tasked with leading this foray into Infernium, and it would be she who led the screaming hordes of demons to battle with their ancient enemies. Failure would not be tolerated. Pyrak had assured her of this, and if his words were not proof enough, his recent actions certainly were. Heskera had not forgotten the demon lord's other general, Kugrot. Pyrak had cut the nalfeshnee demon down at the foot of his throne while Heskera looked on, an unmistakable warning.

"It is empty, my lord," Heskera remarked, slithering up beside her liege.

Pyrak stared down at her. "It is only empty because they don't know we are here yet."

Heskera looked up quizzically. "I am sorry my lord, I don't understand," the marilith asked, as meekly as she could. "Beyemon has this plane under constant surveillance, how could he not know we have arrived?"

Pyrak turned a black scowl upon his general, his eyes glowing momentarily with red rage at being questioned, but the mighty demon lord forced his anger into check and answered. "We have arrived in a null spot," Pyrak remarked with a casual air. "The only place in Avernus where

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the Infernals cannot see."

Pyrak stared across the empty plane. "It seems that fat slug Gemnez has his uses after all," Pyrak said, more to himself than to his subordinate.

The huge demon lord suddenly turned to his general, his eyes brimming with anticipation. "It is time," he said. "Let them in."

Heskera wasted no time in obeying her lord. She slithered to the planar portal. Currently, it measured roughly twenty feet in diameter. The demoness spread her six arms and began intoning the words to a spell. At the completion of the spell, the shimmering circumference of the portal exploded outwards, expanding to nearly ten time its size. From beyond the greatly enlarged portal, a brash cacophony of bestial grunts and perverse muttering burst forth. It was followed closely by the near deafening sound of countless bodies moving forward.

Heskera slithered back to Pyrak's side. The demon lord stood before the huge portal, his greatsword now resting casually across his shoulder. A savage glee filled him as slowly the portal began to vomit forth a horde of demons of all shapes and sizes. From lowly dretch to towering nalfeshnee, a seemingly endless stream of abominable creatures spewed out onto the infernal plane of Avernus.

After nearly an hour, the final demons stepped through, and Heskera stood before a near endless mass of fiends. Pyrak stood beside his general and surveyed his army. He felt *Fiendbleeder* suddenly thrum to life in his grasp. The sword slinked into the demon lord's mind with the ease of a long familiar lover. *A great horde, Pyrak,* it purred into his thoughts. *Who shall lead it?*

Pyrak tried to push the sword from his mind. He knew that it did not approve of Heskera directing the attack. The fiendish weapon wanted no one but Pyrak in command. Through him, it could exert its will over the forces of the Abyss. The demon lord ignored the sword, and he felt it laughing in the back of his mind, knowing full well that it could *make* him do whatever it wished. It amused *Fiendbleeder*, it seemed, to occasionally let Pyrak have his way. This was one of those times, and Pyrak felt the sword slip from his consciousness with great relief.

"Today you shall witness a great victory over our hated foes," Heskera called out over the assembled horde of demons. "Our great lord Pyrak has given us an opportunity to strike at the Infernals before they can assemble an army to oppose us. The slaughter will be grand and each of you shall

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glut your hatred in full!" A great chorus of grunts, howls, and other less identifiable utterances greeted the marilith's proclamation.

Heskera cast a quick glance at Pyrak, looking for any sign of the demon lord's approval, but found nothing in his cold black gaze. "Now follow me, children of the Abyss and I shall lead you to glory!" Heskera punctuated her last statement by drawing all six of her swords with a rasping hiss. Her bravado was not wasted, and another fierce howl arose in answer to her impassioned display.

Pyrak looked on, bemused. Their anonymity would not last. A force as large as this one could not go undetected for long. Pyrak was certain he would face an Infernal army before this campaign was done. He watched Heskera continue her impassioned oratory, noting her boldness and wondering if her actions would measure up to her words.

The great demon lord felt *Fiendbleeder's* presence push softly at the back of his mind, and he tightened his grip around the hilt of the massive sword. *No*, he thought. *This shall be mine, not yours*.

Pyrak seethed. He bolstered his resolve against the inevitable push of the sword's dominant will, but it did not come and *Fiendbleeder* faded from his mind with the echoing ring of mocking laughter.

Free for the moment, Pyrak leapt into the air. He was followed by two thousand elite vrocks he had named "Dreadwings," who had accompanied the horde as his personal guard. Together they formed a dense black cloud of winged terror as they circled above the dense mass of demons, which had now begun to move under Heskera's direction. Pyrak slid *Fiendbleeder* back into the ornate scabbard on his back and turned his mind to conquest.

* * * * *

The horde of demons flowed across the flat plane of Avernus like some colossal amoeba, oozing into every nook and corner in search of infernal prey. With Heskera at the lead on the ground and Pyrak gliding overhead, accompanied by the wing of vrocks, there was little that could escape their attention for long. This was the case with the first group of devils they surprised.

A legion of bearded devils on a routine patrol had the profound misfortune of running into Pyrak's horde. Bearded devils, also known as barbazu, were foul man-sized fiends, covered in glistening scales and

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sporting the thick wiry beard that lent them their name. They were expert combatants, wielding their long saw-toothed glaives with great skill. To their credit, the devils stood their ground. On the order of their captain, a cornugon—a huge gargoyle like devil with a lashing tail and a fearsome barbed whip—the bearded devils quickly formed a six-tiered phalanx and began a determined advance towards the demonic horde. Like a dense hedge of razored hell, the devils marched on, regardless of the near certainty of their annihilation.

No such orderly tactics existed for the demons. They surged forward at Heskera's order, crashing against the arrayed lines of the bearded devils. There were so many demons that they completely enveloped the devil ranks, surrounding them from all sides. The devils fought fiercely. They slew as many as two to three times their number before being pulled down and torn to shreds by the demonic horde. The cornugon attempted to flee the scene of his legion's destruction by taking to the air, but Pyrak and his vrocks quickly caught the fleeing devil. He too met the fate of his underlings in a tangle of ripping talons.

The corpses of the barbazu disappeared quickly down the maws of countless hungry demons. Soon, there was no sign that the legion had ever existed. Flushed with their first success, the horde thundered on, eager for more blood and carnage.

The encounter with the bearded devils was the first of many small skirmishes as the demons flowed across the barren expanse of Avernus. The horde encountered numerous small groups of devils, utterly destroying them before the surprised fiends could react or send for reinforcements.

Heskera was leading ably enough, Pyrak decided. He watched from his lofty vantage point as his marilith general barked orders to her charges. The demons yielded to her dominance for the moment, but leadership was ever a tenuous position in the Abyss. Chaos was the nature of demons, and they followed only those who proved stronger than themselves. They followed Heskera for the moment, due in large part to their lopsided victories over the devils they had encountered. But Pyrak knew that heavy casualties would test their loyalty immediately, and then he would see if Heskera truly had the strength to command.

Pyrak was pleased with the initial success of his army. In all his millennia, he had never made it this far into Avernus. His goal was the iron citadel of Karagg'Var, a massive tower that housed many legions of

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devils. It was here that the true resistance would come, and Pyrak's horde would either overcome or be broken on the windowless walls of the iron fortress. The demon lord's true desire, however improbable, was to take the fortress and establish an Abyssal foothold in Avernus. The prospect of maintaining a fortress inside hostile territory was daunting, but the tower of Karagg'Var could hold many demons, and would make an ideal staging area for further conquest.

Expecting the worst, Pyrak was unfazed when his horde roared within sight of the citadel of Karagg'Var. The tower jutted like a giant nail driven into the blasted earth of Avernus, a single metallic spike soaring up into the red sky of the Nine Hells. Around the tower a series of concentric circles—tall iron walls bristling with spikes and the spears of thousands of barbazu troops—formed a near impregnable barrier to any who dared challenge the might of Infernium.

Heskera called a halt to the horde's forward movement as the tower came into view. With great thrashing and rumbling, the demonic army ground to a stop, while its leaders surveyed the daunting task that lay before them. Pyrak dropped to the ground near his general, while his Dreadwings continued to hover, looming overhead in a dense feathered cloud.

"I have to admit, that's damn impressive," Heskera remarked to her liege, stunned by the sight. Pyrak merely nodded as he took in the task that lay before him.

The Infernal army arrayed in front of the citadel of Karagg'Var was the largest assemblage of devils Pyrak had ever seen. There were easily fifty legions, formed largely from bearded devils or the less common barbed devils, fearsome close quarter combatant covered in razor sharp spines and spurs of bone. In addition, there were large groups of more powerful devils, huge muscular beasts with bat-like wings and fierce tridents of fire-blackened iron. Gargoyle-like horned devils and insectoid ice devil commanders were evident on the field as well, the physical differences between themselves and their troops marking their positions of authority. Overhead, the sky was dark with the wheeling forms of airborne devils. These consisted primarily of the beautiful but deadly erinyes, with a smattering of powerful horned devils acting as aerial commanders.

The devils were organized in groups of one thousand, each legion of bearded or barbed devils led by an ice devil or horned devil. The legions of bearded devils moved in tight phalanxes to make better use of their

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long slashing glaives, while the barbed devils lingered in amorphous mobs, eager to close with the enemy and bring their vicious body spines to bear.

Pyrak's army was near double the size of the Infernal force, but was formed of many lesser demons, such as dretches and even the near mindless manes. He had many squads of more powerful creatures, but their chaotic natures prevented them from working together and forming a cohesive battlefront. Pyrak hoped simply for a battle of attrition, whereby he could overwhelm the Infernal lines with cannon fodder while his more powerful minions brought their formidable spells and combat prowess to the fore. His army was eager enough, but he had seen many an Abyssal horde break against the rigorous discipline of the Infernal lines.

Nearly a thousand yards separated the two armies, and they waited for their respective leaders to order an attack. Pyrak had joined Heskera at the ragged front line of his horde. He watched with curiosity as the legions of devils suddenly split down the middle, allowing a group of bulkier creatures to come to the fore. Pyrak snorted with mocking laughter as he saw who was "in charge" of the devilish army.

"Medregog?" Heskera said with open wonder and revulsion. "I thought you killed that bloated idiot."

"No, he teleported away before I could finish the job," Pyrak replied. "This should be very interesting"

Medregog was the sorriest excuse for a pit fiend Pyrak had ever seen. Against every common notion of what the mightiest of devils should be, he was weak-willed, incompetent, and lacking in any kind of strategic ability. Pyrak had soundly defeated him over a dozen times, but each time the pit fiend had managed to escape destruction.

The last time, Pyrak had managed to sever Medregog's left wing before the desperate devil teleported away. The demon lord could see that Medregog still bore the wound, as even the powerful regenerative abilities of a pit fiend could not heal a wound dealt by *Fiendbleeder*.

Yet Medregog moved through his troops with the air of a conquering hero, surrounded by an honor guard of six horned devils in iron armor. Although pit fiends were the most powerful of devil-kind, Medregog's body—like his battle prowess—was less than awe-inspiring. He was short, barely topping nine feet in height, and his body lacked solidity, drooping in flabby folds of flesh. Even the fearsomeness of a normal pit fiend's countenance was muted in Medregog. His fangs were too short, his eyes

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too small; even his scales lacked luster.

Medregog wore little. His kilt of beaten brass was not unlike the one Hedrenatherax wore, Pyrak noticed—a utilitarian garment both for balors, whose bodies were wreathed in flame, and pit fiends, who favored spells of fire. The pathetic devil had also thrown a crimson cloak over his shoulders to hide his savaged wing. He carried a long iron rod in his right hand and crown of gold adorned his scaly brow.

Watching in disgust as the pit fiend moved closer, the demon lord found it mystifying that Medregog had climbed the ranks of devil-kind to achieve the status of pit fiend. Devils were not known for rewarding cowardice and incompetence, but somehow Medregog had managed to defy the odds and stand once again before Pyrak. The demon lord clenched his talons in frustration; he would not let Medregog escape his wrath again.

Medregog had reached the front of his army. He flung his cloak over a shoulder with a flourish, then raised his iron rod and pointed it towards the demonic horde.

"Go back!" the pit fiend boomed. "You will find only death here."

Pyrak ignored his enemy's warning and called out over the distance that separated them. "Medregog, where is Beyemon? He certainly couldn't have left *you* in charge of all these troops."

Pyrak could see his adversary bristle even at this great distance. "Beyemon has no time to waste on the likes of you, demon!" the fat devil shouted back. "The lord of Avernus has entrusted your destruction to me."

Pyrak chuckled at Medregog's boast. "Well if you are so keen on my destruction, why don't you fly over here and we can settle this whole thing personally?"

A howl of laughter and derision arose from Pyrak's horde. "Asmodeus take you, Pyrak!" Medregog cursed. "I will make a cloak of your feathered hide before this day is out!"

Pyrak leaned down to Heskera and said softly, "Make sure he doesn't leave." The marilith nodded, the hint of a smile brightening her exotic features.

"Legions! Forward!" Medregog shrieked, and the colossal Infernal army began to advance in precise formation. After giving the order to attack, Medregog melted back into the safety of his army's vanguard.

"Here they come," Heskera remarked. Her whole body quivered with the thought of the impending carnage. "Now?" she asked, looking up at Pyrak.

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"Yes, now. Get them into ranks."

Although his demons resisted any kind of organized direction, Pyrak had managed, through threats and intimidation, to teach his horde one trick. At Heskera's order, fifty massive creatures strode forward, giant humanoids with great black wings and pale, bluish-white skin.

These entities were strikingly different than the demons around them, for only half of their parentage was Abyssal. Each had been bred from the union of a demon and a mortal cloud giant. These half-fiend giants carried huge silvered mauls, and each was armored in thick sheets of blackened steel.

With much prodding from Heskera, the demonic giants began to arrange themselves into a rough wedge. Behind the wedge of giants the rest of the horde began to mass, adding to the initial formation until a massive spearhead of demonic bodies stood poised to crash against the Infernal legions.

A scant hundred yards now separated the two armies. Pyrak turned to Heskera with a stern warning. "Keep control of them or this will be over as quickly as it begins. Do not fail me." Pyrak's tone left no doubt in the marilith's mind that if she did not emerge victorious today, her very existence would be forfeit.

"Yes, my liege. I will not falter," Heskera replied, lifting her chin and smiling confidently.

Pyrak turned from his general and spread his great wings, drawing *Fiendbleeder* from its sheath across his back. "Dreadwings! To me!" he boomed, and with that, Pyrak and over two thousand vrocks rose into the air. They sped towards the contingent of airborne devils that hovered over the Infernal army.

Pyrak and his vrocks closed the distance between themselves and the flying devils in seconds. They had formed themselves into a tight wedge similar to the one the demons on the ground were using. With Pyrak at the head of this formation, they plowed into the flying devils in a concentrated mass of tearing talons and ripping beaks. The devils stood little chance against Pyrak and his vrocks, and the demons inflicted heavy casualties in the first few seconds of the aerial battle.

On the ground below, the point of the huge demonic formation had reached the first rank of devils. The fiendish giants crashed into the Infernals like a thunderbolt, their hammers crushing scores of bearded devils before

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they were even within reach of the smaller fiends' weapons. Pushed by the massed Abyssal forces behind them, the giants began moving forward, driving a gap into the devil line, and a multitude of lesser demons poured through it.

Above the surface battle, Pyrak pulled his sword from the dying corpse of a horned devil, its gleaming red eyes surging with hatred as its wings failed and it fell from the air. The vrocks had cleared out most of the devil air power, and Pyrak snuck a glance at his horde's progress on the ground.

The demonic wedge had slammed into the devils near the center of their formations. The tactic had done its job and broken the cohesiveness of the Infernal units. This rendered the battlefield a fierce disorganized melee, which was exactly the style of combat Pyrak and his demons excelled at. The fighting was mostly hand to hand, although a few of the more powerful fiends on both sides began to smite their foes with blasts of fire or freezing cold.

Pyrak and his vrocks, having either slain or driven off their airborne foes, turned their attention to the conflict on the ground and dove into the colossal mass of battling fiends. The demon lord and his Dreadwings slammed into one of the few remaining devil legions that had retained its lines. The vrocks dropped into the middle of the formation of bearded devils, clawing and biting, while Pyrak slashed wildly with *Fiendbleeder*, slaughtering scores of the lesser devils. The bearded devil ranks collapsed almost immediately, and without the strength of their rigid formation they were massacred.

Pyrak found himself alone in a small empty space on the battlefield. It was like being in the eye of a storm, as the battle raged around the demon lord but he was untouched by it. Pyrak heard Heskera barking orders to the east and turned his gaze to the tangled knot of creatures that battled there. The marilith was in the thick of it, her six blades whirling like a storm of steel. He watched as she disemboweled a horned devil with a triple swipe of three blades on her left side, while skewering two barbed devils with a pair of blades on her right. She seemed to have things under control for the moment, but the tide of battle could change in an instant, and Pyrak was not about to lose his advantage.

The demon lord threw back his head and emitted a short piecing croak, a call that was echoed by the nearby vrocks. The vrocks moved in quickly and formed a massive circle around their master. Some of the devils fighting

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around them broke off from battling Pyrak's horde and hurried to disrupt the gathering circle. Many of them had seen this tactic before, though not on this large of a scale. Enough vrocks remained outside the circle to engage the devils that were now swarming the area, allowing Pyrak and the cadre of vrocks to remain relatively undisturbed as they began to dance.

The vrocks moved slowly around Pyrak, contorting their bodies in obscene angles and croaking in a shrill, incomprehensible language. There was a fell rhythm to the dance; the air began to thicken with a strange static charge. Pyrak croaked and writhed in time with his demonic kin, and as the battle raged around them the pace of their bizarre movements started to quicken.

Seeing what Pyrak was doing, Heskera had also broken off from the center of the fighting. With a small contingent of babau and two of the remaining giants, she moved to help fend off the devils clustering around the vrocks' circle. The fighting became intense as the more powerful devils, knowing full well what Pyrak was up to, drove their lesser minions relentlessly. Despite their efforts, the Infernals could not break the line of demonic defenders in time to stop Pyrak's dance.

The dance ended abruptly, with each vrock—including Pyrak—suddenly stopping in place and emitting a single deafening shriek. The magical charge that had been building in the air was released, a massive explosion of crackling blue energy that fanned out in all directions. It passed harmlessly through each demon it encountered, but ripped into the surrounding devils.

The unholy energy shredded the Infernal bodies, destroying the lesser devils and staggering even the most powerful. Some among the devils had encountered the vrocks' strange ritual before—the Dance of Ruin, they called it—but Pyrak's personal power had bolstered the destruction fivefold. The devils' ranks were decimated.

Even those devils who had survived Pyrak's dance of devastation were momentarily stunned, and now the horde fell upon them. The ensuing slaughter was complete, as the now vastly outnumbered Infernals fell before their demonic adversaries.

Pyrak watched the carnage gleefully, until he saw a crimson-cloaked figure suddenly break off from the fighting and make for the gates of Karagg'Var. Medregog, ever the coward, had seen the inevitable conclusion to the battle, and was fleeing the scene with alacrity. It was

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clear that, after making for the outskirts of the fighting, he would teleport to safety undisturbed.

"Heskera!" Pyrak cried, pointing *Fiendbleeder* at the fleeing Medregog. The marilith was in the thick of the fighting, but easily dispatched the three bearded devils she was facing and turned to follow the demon lord's gesture.

Heskera was a sorcerer of no small talent, and she knew what Pyrak wished her to do. The marilith sheathed two of her swords to free a pair of her hands and quickly rattled off the words to an arcane incantation. At the spell's culmination, she pointed her index finger at the fleeing pit fiend and a thin purple ray of magical energy flashed from her extended digit, striking Medregog squarely in the back. The ray did not injure the pit fiend, and his body was only outlined momentarily in a harmless purple glow.

Pyrak launched himself into the air and raced towards Medregog. The fat devil was still pushing his way through the remaining knots of combatants, too intent on his escape to see Pyrak in pursuit. As Medregog reached the edge of the melee, he was struck from behind by the demon lord's massive body and sent crashing to the earth.

Pyrak fanned his great wings to halt his forward momentum. He landed softly, straddling the prostrate form of Medregog, *Fiendbleeder* dangling casually from one taloned hand.

"Get up you sorry pile of lemure dung!" the demon lord spat.

Medregog scrambled away from Pyrak on his scaly belly, rolling over on his back when he had gotten a few feet away. A wide mocking smile filled the pit fiend's gruesome features, as he spoke the syllables of the spell that would transport him to safety. But nothing happened. The spell fizzled, its only effect a pathetic popping noise. The look of abject terror that crossed Medregog's face was pure delight to Pyrak.

"Oh no, there is no escape this time,' Pyrak said. hefting *Fiendbleeder* in a two-handed grip. "Your incompetence sickens me. I will be doing the entire Infernal race a favor by ending your miserable existence. Now get up and fight!"

Pyrak backed off a few paces, knowing full well that even at a dead run, Medregog could not hope to escape him. Medregog climbed to his feet slowly, his great flabby body quivering with terror.

Beyond Pyrak. the battle had ended, with every single one of Medregog's troops having either fled or been destroyed. Behind him stood the tower

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of Karagg'Var, a safe haven he could not reach. He knew that the devils who remained inside the tower would not aid him—in fact, many would enjoy seeing him slain on the blood-soaked field of battle. He was alone and outnumbered fifty thousand to one.

With no other choice, Medregog gripped the long iron rod he had carried with him from the tower and fingered a small metal stud near the base of the implement. A scythe-like blade suddenly sprang from the rod, transforming it into a wicked, hooked battleaxe.

Pyrak sprang forward to meet his foe. Meanwhile, Heskera and the rest of the horde moved up to watch their master do battle, forming a massive circle around the two combatants.

Medregog began the fight predictably, calling on his innate magical abilities and dropping a great ball of fire at his feet. The explosion was immense, but the pit fiend stood unharmed at its center, his Infernal body proof against the flames. The spell had little effect on Pyrak, barely singeing his feathers as he leapt clear of the conflagration, but the burst of fire momentarily hid his foe from view. Medregog did not waste his advantage and charged through the obscuring flames, battleaxe raised high over his head.

Pyrak was nearly caught off guard by Medregog's charge, and brought *Fiendbleeder* up in a desperate parry, deflecting the pit fiend's powerful overhand blow and giving ground. Surprised by the furious attack, Pyrak was forced to view his opponent in a new light. Medregog was a fool and a coward, but he was still a pit fiend. Now that he was cornered, he would likely fight with every ounce of strength he could muster.

Again Medregog charged, but this time Pyrak was ready. As the pit fiend drew near, Pyrak used his larger size and greater reach to good effect. Quick as a snake, *Fiendbleeder* licked out, up and over the slower moving Medregog's guard before he could react in time to ward off the blow. The great enchanted blade bit into the pit fiend's right wrist, severing the hand and sending his weapon—disembodied fist still clutching the haft—spinning to the ground in a shower of ichor. Medregog howled with pain and horror. He stumbled back, clutching the spurting stump of his wrist.

"No! Please! This cannot be!" he cried as Pyrak stalked towards him. "I will concede the tower to you! Just let me live!" Medregog was screaming now, thick greenish spittle flying from his mouth.

Medregog sank to his knees as Pyrak drew near, mumbling the words

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to his teleportation spell. But it failed again, and again, thanks to the dimensional anchor that Heskera's spell had placed upon him. Pyrak rolled his eyes as he loomed over his adversary, scarcely believing that one of Infernium's mightiest devils could be reduced to such as state. He reached out with one taloned hand to grasp Medregog by his intact left wrist. The pit fiend did not pull away, but kept mumbling his teleportation spell like some bizarre, arcane mantra.

Pyrak lifted the pit fiend from the ground. He dangled like a sack of grain a full four feet from the earth. The victorious demon lord stared into the pit fiend's pleading eyes for a quick second, but found nothing but limitless depths of cowardice. Pyrak shrugged, and then casually rammed *Fiendbleeder* through Medregog's chest, impaling him upon the massive blade.

Pyrak held the skewered Medregog aloft as he gurgled and spat, spewing his thick black blood from his fanged mouth and screaming incoherently. It took nearly five minutes for Medregog to die, and Pyrak watched with great satisfaction. Finally, the light left the pit fiend's eyes and he became still.

When Medregog's body stopped twitching, Pyrak flung the great bloated corpse to the ground and wiped *Fiendbleeder* clean with the back of one feathered arm. A horde of lesser demons swarmed the body, eager to devour the blood and flesh of a powerful devil, and Pyrak turned away to let his horde have their feast.

Heskera slithered up beside her liege and the two demons stared up at the intimidating majesty of Karagg'Var. The tower was still manned by thousands of devils, visible on the tower battlements and along the iron walls the circled the great citadel.

"What do we do now, my lord?" the marilith asked softly.

Pyrak looked down at his general, his eyes gleaming. "We lay siege, of course."

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Time moves oddly in the Abyss. The passing of minutes and hours proceed at an apparently random and haphazard velocity. Blasphemous green suns rise and set, skies darken and become bloated with foul stinking rain, and shadows lengthen or recede heedless of light or its absence. All of this happens with no forewarning or inclination, just a series of altogether unrelated events, combining to make up an Abyssal day.

From his tiny cave, Hazergal the dretch watched the bizarre manifestation of Abyssal weather with much fascination. He marveled at the complete and utter randomness of it all. No pattern or method could be applied to such a place. It simply existed as a state of almost pure chaos. But unlike the plane of Limbo, the true plane of chaos, the Abyss tempered its strange manifestation with the blackest evil. There was no beauty here. All was raving and pain. Even the sky above, infested with writhing, worm-like clouds, offered no solace or surcease from the constant hammering malevolence.

Hazergal had holed up in this shallow cavern for what seemed like days, rifling through his changing mind for something that would lend some sense of reason to his bizarre situation. He found nothing but his own—now alien—thought processes and what seemed a limitless gulf of arcane knowledge.

He had realized shortly after his transformation that he was no longer Hazergal. That being had ceased to be. The demon whose flesh he now wore had added its bizarre psychology and physiology to that of the once-human mage to create an entirely new creature. He was neither wholly demon nor wholly human, but a combination of the two, in both body and mind. The former archmage found that many of his memories, those from his former life, had been burned away by his terrifying ordeal. Despite all attempts to cling to his past, the transformation to dretch had left his mind scoured clean of all but the rudimentary elements of self. He knew that he was Hazergal, once a human archmage on the Prime Material world of Othus, but the minor details of his 200-plus years as a mortal man seemed to have simply trickled away.

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Hazergal sat and struggled in vain to recall his childhood, his parents, anything from his former existence beyond his name, his arcane ability, and those few crystal clear moments just before his death. His desire for vengeance remained strong, however, although he was no longer certain why he wanted it. He remembered that Azadan had slain him, but beyond that there was nothing. His killer's motivations and relationship were only vague recollections of emotions long dead. Fear, anger, betrayal, these feelings hovered just beyond the grasp of his mind, but added their venom to his lust for revenge nonetheless.

In between his soul searching reveries, Hazergal had experimented with his newly found powers and, to a lesser extent, his demonic body. He found that he merely had to focus on a task and instantly an appropriate spell would take shape in his mind. If he needed to reach a high place, a levitation spell would quickly come to the fore. To smite an enemy, a near-limitless array of attack spells would be his to command. There was no need for spellbooks or the faulty limitations of human memory. Each spell was laid out in sharp definition, simply waiting to be used.

Hazergal was well pleased by his vastly enhanced magical skills. However, he was less than thrilled with his new body. Small yet flabby, the form of a dretch was nothing short of pathetic. Without his magic, he would have been easy prey for the terrible beasts the roamed the wastes of the Abyss, not to mention more powerful demons.

Unsure of how long he had lingered within his cavern, Hazergal found himself growing restless and developing a most peculiar hunger. He had not slept since his death, as his demonic body seemed to require no rest, and try as he might, he could not satiate the strange hunger growing within him. The former archmage had summoned all manner of scrumptious delicacies with his magic, but even after gorging himself to the point of bursting, he still hungered for something more. It was a desire he could not define.

Then, a group of babau stumbled into his ravine, and his hunger burst forth in a ravenous tide.

There were four of the foul skeletal demons, all armed with cruelly barbed lances, similar to the ones used around the spawning pool of Gemnez Drak. It was clear they were searching for something, as they spread out immediately after entering the ravine, probing every nook in the black, shale-like rock with their lances.

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They're looking for me, Hazergal knew. The commotion he had caused at the spawning pool would certainly not go unanswered, and the great balor Hedrenatherax would almost certainly seek reprisal for his defeat. Hazergal could not allow himself to be found, as his bizarre transformation, and the implications it represented, would be seen as a threat to every powerful demon in the area.

The babau were slowly making their way down the ravine, following the sluggish stream that ran down its center. They were still a good hundred yards away when Hazergal attacked.

The dretch archmage had cast a number of spells in rapid succession after pulling back into the confining darkness of his cave, cloaking his body in several layers of protective enchantments. An invisibility spell hid him from sight, while a layer of magical force protected his body from incoming blows. Lastly, a spell of magical flight would allow him to assail his foes from the air and gain complete surprise.

Standing at the lip of his cavern the invisible archmage watched the babau demons move closer. Hunger welled within him as he viewed the slime-slicked bodies of the approaching demons. This aching desire that was indescribably alien, yet urgent, visceral, and overpowering.

Hazergal drifted away from his cave, overlooking the ravine from a sheer mountainside thirty feet above the ground. He glided through the air toward his quarry, who had now regrouped and stood clustered together, conversing in the guttural tongue of the Abyss. Hazergal watched as one of the babau raised an emaciated arm and pointed towards the cave he had just vacated. The remaining three demons grunted their compliance and the group of fiends began to move again.

Hazergal moved silently towards the approaching babau until he hovered just ten feet over their heads. Completely oblivious to Hazergal's presence, the babau could do nothing but react with open-mouthed shock as the object of their search suddenly appeared directly above them. Hazergal's invisibility spell collapsed as he spewed forth the words to a powerful incantation, slightly altered in form to accommodate the dretch mage's choice of enemies. The four babau were arranged in a staggered line, a very fortuitous arrangement for Hazergal's chosen spell.

The lead babau brought his lance up in a vain attempt to strike at the hovering dretch, but was far two slow as a crackling bolt of blue flame flew from Hazergal's pointing index finger and slammed into the fiend's

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skeletal chest. The babau's body went rigid as the jolt of searing magic burst through his body. The bolt burned completely through the demon, but did not falter there, leaping away from its initial target to strike each of the remaining babau. The stench of burning flesh drifted up to Hazergal as the four demons writhed and twisted in the grip of his mighty spell. Only after all four had been struck was the eldritch fire of Hazergal's magic quenched, as the four babau collapsed to the ground in a smoldering heap.

Settling to the ground a few feet away from the carnage he had wrought, Hazergal was immediately staggered by wrenching hunger pangs. His mind clouded, and within seconds his entire universe consisted only of the smoking corpses of the babau and the irresistible aroma of their charred meat.

Near mindless with appetite, Hazergal waddled over to the nearest corpse and fell to his knees. His long fingered hands scrabbled over the chest of the slain babau. Then he began to dig his talons into the creature's burnt flesh. Hazergal ripped and slashed at the babau's torso, finally boring a wide, gaping hole. This aperture revealed a blackened lump of muscular flesh as large as two clenched fists.

Hazergal reached into the demon's chest to clutch its now silent heart with both hands. Then, with a savage tug, he ripped the organ free, trailing a dripping mess of coagulate gore.

By now, Hazergal was drooling, absorbed by a craving he was helpless to understand. With a sharp sigh of something more akin to lust than mere hunger, the dretch archmage began to devour his prize. He swallowed the meat whole, still smoking from the spell that had blackened it. In three great bites the babau's heart was gone.

But Hazergal was still ravenous. The dretch crawled to the next babau corpse and repeated the process he had enacted upon the first. Eventually, he had consumed the hearts of all four babau. He sat down, finally contented, his distended belly jutting grossly from his abdomen.

With his longing abated, Hazergal felt his mind emerging from the haze of desire. He was dumbfounded. What had brought about this inexplicable lust? He looked over at the four savaged corpses of the babau and felt his gorge rise. The stench of their charred corpses was revolting. Why would he have such a need to devour their flesh? What was he becoming?

There had been no control of his own actions when the hunger had gripped him. This frightened the fallen archmage immensely. His demon

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self had simply assumed control and directed his body in its gruesome task. A pall of self-loathing settled over Hazergal, and he stared with disgust at what had once been his hands. The gore-encrusted talons had eagerly shoveled lumps of unnatural filth into his mouth. The part of him that was still human quailed at the implications of such an act.

Hazergal's descent into self-degradation was suddenly halted. A burning sensation took hold of his gut, spreading tendrils of warmth tingling throughout his demonic form. Alarmed, he quickly climbed to his feet, only to collapse again, as the strange fire in his belly became a furnace of white-hot misery. The pain spread across his entire body, locking his limbs in spastic convulsions and filling his mind with a howling maelstrom of images.

He saw a tall kingly figure seated on a basalt throne, a great naked sword across his robed knees. The figure's features were comely, with the bearing of a powerful lord. But a demonic taint was evident, for the mysterious being had glistening black skin and glowing red orbs that burned with power beneath a clean, noble brow. His rich, dark robes, embroidered with silver thread, hid the rest of his body from sight, but Hazergal could tell that it would be as physically impressive as the creature's handsome face.

Hazergal writhed, helpless, as the vision continued. His awareness seemed to hang disembodied in the throne room of this powerful fiendish lord. The archmage watched all manner of demons supplicate themselves before the majestic figure, even balors bowing before its enthroned might. The images were silent, but as Hazergal watched a single word began to boil in the back of his skull. Two syllables, beginning as a whisper, but slowly building: *HAZAG! HAZAG!*

The repetition seemed to grow louder and louder, until the chanting of the alien words became unbearable. Then, just when his head seemed ready to burst from the deafening assault, the vision suddenly faded. The last thing Hazergal heard was his own voice, emitting a terrible choked shriek that reverberated back at him from the walls of the canyon.

As the echo of his scream slowly faded, Hazergal found himself lying upon the ground, his face pressed into the bitter dust of the ravine. Slowly, he found his strength and lifted his body from the ground. He tottered, confused and reeling, amid the corpses of his victims. As he stood there, trying to gain control over his swirling thoughts, he noticed something odd. His vantage point was higher. It was as if he had somehow grown.

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This new horror cut through his confusion, and he cast his eyes down to view his altered form.

Emaciated, black flesh had replaced the drooping flab of his dretch body. He was taller, close to seven feet, with long double-jointed arms ending in a more human-like hand, consisting of four fingers and a thumb. Wicked talons capped each digit, and Hazergal noted with some approval the obvious adroitness of his new extremities. He ran his hand up over his skeletal chest and then to his misshapen head, which he probed in frenzied but delicate precision. There was no trace of a nose, only two small holes below the deep bony cavities of his eye sockets. A mouth that was all fangs and terror revealed itself under his probing touch, and finally he felt a single curved horn rising from the back of his skull, arcing up nearly three feet to terminate in a needle sharp point.

His gaze rested on the corpses of the four demons, whose hearts he had recently consumed, and the truth of his situation rang clear. The bizarre laws of the Abyss had touched him once again, making his body conform to its own mysterious and chaotic whims. He was a dretch no longer. His grisly feast, somehow infused with the fading life essence of the slain fiends, had transformed him. Hazergal the dretch was now Hazergal the babau.

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Gemnez watched with disinterest as a pair of babau slowly removed the limbs from a squealing dretch with rusted cleavers. The small demon's wailing filled Gemnez's pleasure chamber, but brought him little more than the beginnings of headache. The great horned devil had many minions, and they often presented him with these acts of unnecessary violence. Ostensibly, these "performances" were meant to amuse the devil, but in truth he was bored by such mundane cruelties.

"Enough!" Gemnez boomed, causing the two babau to cease their amputations in mid-stroke. The demons turned their ichor-spattered faces up to their master, first with surprise, and then with the dreaded realization that they had displeased him.

"Take it outside and feed it to Uzog," the mighty Infernal continued, now that he had his minions' complete attention. "Please." The last word came out in a silken purr, accented by the toothy creasing of Gemnez's gaudily painted lips. The babau wasted no time in complying and dragged the still whimpering dretch—now minus two arms and most of a leg—from the pleasure chamber, leaving only a smear of viscous ichor.

The sound of the massive double doors closing behind the exiting babau was welcome to the huge devil, eliciting a thick sigh of relief. Gemnez settled his bloated, toad-like body back on the mountain of cushions that served as his throne and sleeping pallet. Here in the fortress of Gemnez Drak, he was master. None dared defy him here, for fear of awakening the ire of his patron, the demon lord Pyrak.

Gemnez let his thick-scaled eyelids close as he drifted back into his memories, tracing the path that had brought him to this place of power. As a horned devil, Gemnez had held much power and prestige in the burning gloom of Infernium. For millennia he had served the masters of the Nine Hells, and served them well. His last assignment, as advisor to the pit fiend general Beyemon, had set into motion the chain of events that had led to his exile—and further, led him to question the very meaning of his existence.

Beyemon ruled the first of the nine layers of Hell, known as Avernus. This vast, heat-blasted plane served as the training ground for massive

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Infernal armies. These devils marshaled such multitudes for a single purpose: to halt the progress of invading demons during their periodic incursions. Beyemon led the defensive forces, and performed his duty with the utmost precision. In his entire tenure as an archdevil, he had never once allowed a demon horde to breach the defenses of Avernus.

Gemnez had been responsible for much of Beyemon's success, using his vast network of spies, both mortal and fiendish, to predict the movements of powerful demon lords in the Abyss. Because of the reconnaissance provided by Gemnez, most invaders found themselves confronted with Beyemon and an army of elite devils the moment they stepped through a portal.

For centuries, Gemnez served Beyemon, helping the mighty pit fiend thwart the advances of many demon lords, and ensuring the security of Infernium's border. He was well rewarded for his outstanding service and commanded a veritable army of his own loyal minions, but he was not satisfied.

Like all devils, Gemnez understood the universe as place of well-ordered structure, a place where loyalty and adherence to the strict code of the Nine Hells allowed one to achieve power and prosperity. Gemnez had followed the law of the hells for his entire existence, believing fully in its teachings. He believed in the superiority of devil-kind and, like all his brethren, hated the disorder and chaos that grew unchecked in the home of their ancestral enemies, the demons. After centuries of working with his spies and informants, many of whom were Abyssal renegades, Gemnez began to understand the inner workings of the Abyss in a way that no other devil could match.

The rise of a powerful demon lord called Pyrak drew Gemnez's attention immediately. Here was a demon who understood the nature of his chaotic brethren, harnessed it to his will, and set it loose upon his enemies. And Pyrak proved worthy of the devil's attention, for he was the first demon to defeat one of Beyemon's armies.

The demon lord had proved to be skilled tactician. He had bested Beyemon by undermining the orderly nature of his precise formations. Pyrak had known that his Infernal counterparts often built their forces around infantries of lesser devils, which could match his more powerful demons if they held together. An Abyssal army operated as a huge mob of individuals, and even when the demons were more numerous and more formidable, they would almost always break against the arrayed ranks of

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the Infernals. Through fear and outright intimidation, Pyrak had marshaled his demonic hordes into simple but effective formations that could match their Infernal enemies for those first few moments of combat.

The crafty demon lord had defeated Beyemon in their first encounter much as he had surprised Medregog before the tower of Karagg'Var: by surprising him with a wedge of massive half-fiends bred of mortal monsters. The wedge cracked open the close formation of the devilish ranks, reducing them to utter disarray, and allowed Pyrak's horde to flow through the breach. In the chaos that followed, the devils were defeated handily, unused to fighting in the wild melee created by the dissolution of their ranks.

Beyemon was forced to retreat, while Pyrak tallied the first of many victories he would achieve in his long and bloody reign. A superior force of devils eventually stopped that initial foray, but a dire precedent had been set. Beyemon and his devils had been defeated on their own soil.

The cunning required to make tactical use of a horde of demons had impressed Gemnez a great deal. He had never seen a demon lord so focused, so driven that even his own natural yearning for chaos was eclipsed by the desire to achieve his goal.

Beyemon, of course, had been furious, and his rage had lasted weeks. Even after the eventual defeat of Pyrak's first horde, the archdevil indulged his fury on his lesser minions, drilling his armies to the point of exhaustion and executing any commander who dared question his ruthless techniques. Gemnez vowed to learn all he could of his master's newly arisen foe.

He learned that Pyrak had once served the ancient demon lord Pazuzu, but had defeated his former master and driven him from the Abyss. He had taken up residence in Pazuzu's grand floating palace, and now commanded a near limitless horde of demons and evil creatures of the air. All of this was of little surprise to Gemnez, as demon lords often battled each other for power in the endless chaos of the Abyss.

What the horned devil found odd was that a relative upstart like Pyrak had displaced Pazuzu, one of the oldest and most powerful demons in Abyss. It was true that Pyrak led an elite force of vrocks known as the Dreadwings, an abnormally loyal group of fiends that numbered over two thousand strong. It was also true that Pyrak had proved to be a brilliant tactician and a creature that was willing to defy his very nature to achieve his aims. But all of this should not have lent Pyrak the strength to defeat

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Pazuzu, especially not in one on one combat. Yet that was how Gemnez understood the battle was resolved.

Gemnez was at first baffled by this anomaly, then found himself shaken to the core by what Pyrak might represent. Demons and devils came to their natures not of any free will, but were instead created with the need for chaos or law ingrained in their very beings. It was all but unheard of for any fiend, be it devil or demon, to forsake his nature, even for the prospect of increased personal power. It was simply inconceivable. A demon's mind could not operate in a lawful, orderly manner, just as devils were incapable of thinking in the random and chaotic fashion of their demonic enemies.

Gemnez had long considered himself a student of the various philosophies of the planes, and had always considered the path of law to be superior over that of chaos. But as he learned more of Pyrak, he began to realize that Beyemon's most hated foe had bested him because he was not bound by the chains of his fiendish nature, and could, in fact, utilize his own power and potential to its utmost.

Gemnez began to watch his masters, and even his own minions, very closely. He observed their behavior, studying the very nature of Infernal life. For the first time, Gemnez began to notice the flaws in what he had once perceived as perfection.

The rigid hierarchy of devil-kind promoted loyalty and strict adherence to timeless customs and rituals. No devil, no matter how powerful or how insignificant, did anything without the approval of his direct superior. This behavior functioned at all levels of devil society, all the way up to the archdevils themselves, insuring that the rigid line of authority remained intact and enforced.

As a result, the thought of doing something different than what was expected, or something that had never been done before, was inconceivable. The laws and traditions of Infernium had been laid down with the assumption that there was no better way. Any transgression was considered the height of lunacy.

All of this discipline served its purpose, as the orderly devils always proved to be a match for their chaotic counterparts, the demons. But Gemnez soon saw there was a stalemate. The law of Infernium could equal for the chaos of the Abyss, but that was all. Neither could overcome the other, because both were incapable of doing the unexpected. The demons, for all their seeming unpredictability, could in fact be counted on to fight as

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an individualized mob, a tactic the devils had long since learned to defeat. At the same time, Gemnez and his Infernal brethren lacked imagination, and so their actions had become just as predictable as their foes'. This, of course, was why Infernium had long ago ceased sending armies into the Abyss: they simply were not adaptable enough to survive.

At first, Gemnez went on as he always had, watching his enemy Pyrak and serving his master Beyemon. But as Pyrak's victories began to mount, the horned devil began to lose his focus—and, more over, his very drive to succeed in the Nine Hells. Understanding his true nature, and that of his fellow devils had awoken something within him, a desire to break the chains of servitude and law that bound him, to truly be his own individual.

He longed for a little chaos.

Gemnez's did not hesitate to act upon his desires for change and saw that only one creature in all the multiverse might understand his plight. Gemnez contacted the demon lord Pyrak in secret and requested sanctuary within his realm. Naturally, Pyrak did not trust his new found ally, and required that the horned devil prove his rogue status, something Gemnez was more than eager to do.

Gemnez offered Pyrak the life of one of the minor dukes of hell, a powerful pit fiend named Shenkara. Shenkara served Beyemon as a lieutenant and often commanded the archdevil's armies in his stead when he was engaged in more important activities. Gemnez informed Pyrak that Shenkara would be leading an elite unit of barbed devils from Beyemon's Bronze Citadel to the fortress of Karagg'Var. The Infernal duke would be easy prey for an unexpected attack from an Abyssal horde.

Pyrak was no fool. He dispatched a large force of demons led by Kugrot, a nalfeshnee general of no meager skill. Gemnez's information proved to be flawless, and Pyrak's general presented him with the head of Shenkara the following day. Intrigued, Pyrak accepted Gemnez's offer and allowed him sanctuary within his realm. Gemnez had hidden his betrayal well, and his flight from Infernium went completely unnoticed.

Gemnez was granted dominion over one of the large spawning pools in Pyrak's realm, a place the demon lord called "Gemnez Drak," which, in the Abyssal tongue, simply meant "Gemnez's Hole." The great horned devil was also given a contingent of babau underlings. And with that, the rogue devil began his service to his new master, as advisor and informant.

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Gemnez soon learned that he actually had two masters. One was Pyrak; the other was the sword *Fiendbleeder,* which controlled the powerful demon lord. Gemnez learned that *Fiendbleeder* was driven to destroy the devils, yet for some unfathomable reason it had allowed Gemnez to serve it. Gemnez was more than willing to provide all that he knew of Avernus and Beyemon's armies, but he was profoundly disappointed to learn that Pyrak's anomalous behavior was due to his mindless devotion to *Fiendbleeder,* and not his own progressive thinking.

The mystery of Pyrak's defeat over Pazuzu was no longer in question. The sword *Fiendbleeder* was the center of Pyrak's power, and without it he would be nothing more than a minor demon prince of little influence.

Gemnez lamented that he might be the only being of his kind in the multiverse, until one fateful day, when he watched a dretch defeat a balor in single combat. The possibilities that arose from that confrontation were endless, and Gemnez found himself possessed of a new purpose, one that required him to find this strange dretch and bend it to his will.

The horned devil smiled serenely in his reverie. The implications of a damned petitioner who retained the memories and powers of his previous life were monumental. Such a being represented a new order, a direction that the creative forces of the universe had only just conceived. Gemnez felt the hand of fate at work. Something that would change the very fabric of reality was about to occur, and Gemnez knew *he* would be the one to guide its course.

The pounding of heavy footfalls pulled Gemnez from his thoughts. He winced at the jarring crash, as the doors to his pleasure chamber were thrown open. The reek of brimstone and the invasive stench of burnt flesh filled the chamber as Hedrenatherax stalked into Gemnez's presence.

The balor had recovered from his dip in the spawning pool and his massive red-scaled body was glowing with unnatural health. The balor wore his usual glare of barely contained violence, and behind him he dragged the still smoking corpse of a demon burnt beyond recognition. Hedrenatherax tossed the blistered remains at the foot of Gemnez's cushions and crossed his thick arms over his broad scaly chest, scowling.

"Why thank you, Hedrenatherax, but unfortunately I have already dined," Gemnez said with a polite smile. "And I prefer my meals somewhat less charred."

"To the hells with you, you great bloated fool!" Hedrenatherax spat, his

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thick, clawed hands clenching in frustration. "Do you know what this is!?"

The horned devil ignored the insults. He had already proved his physical superiority over the balor and was content to let him have his barbs, if they gave Hedrenatherax some notion of independence and power.

Gemnez rose from his cushions and waddled over to the smoking heap the demon had deposited before him. "Well, I assume it is one of the babau I sent out after your dretch," Gemnez answered, peering closely at the remains. It was quite obvious that the demon had been slain by the intense heat of some kind of fiery spell.

"Yes, and there are three more like it where I found this one." Hedrenatherax moved to stand opposite the devil, then squatted down on his haunches. "Look here," the balor motioned with one taloned hand. "What do you make of this?"

Gemnez shifted his attention to where the balor was motioning and saw that a large ragged hole had been bored into the babau's chest. The wound would not have been a result of the spell that had slain the demon, and had most likely occurred after its death. "The heart is gone," Gemnez announced. "Are the others such as this?"

Hedrenatherax grunted an affirmative and stood. "The little bastard ripped the hearts out of all of them. I can't imagine what he could be doing with them."

"Adding to his power. What else?" Gemnez answered, his voice distant as he measured the implications of what lay before him.

"What do you mean, toad?" Hedrenatherax questioned, his reptilian features creased in puzzlement.

Gemnez sighed loudly. As always, Hedrenatherax's relative lack of intellect amazed him. The balor dealt with every problem in the same way, with brute force. Gemnez found it absolutely baffling that Hedrenatherax had risen to power over many of his much smarter brethren. "The heart is a reservoir of power. Our dretch has consumed the life energy of four demons and has likely grown in power as a result."

Hedrenatherax shook his horned head vigorously. "You mean he has climbed to the next form in the demon hierarchy," he said with a snort of incredulity. "You need a spawning pit for that, toad. Any demon knows that."

At first, Gemnez marveled at Hedrenatherax's inability to conceive of something outside his own experience, but only for a moment. It was

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a trait he was finding more and more common among demons and devils alike. "You are looking for a babau now. The dretch no longer holds our little petitioner."

"No! That is not possible! I have told you—" Hedrenatherax began, enraged. He was silenced in mid-rant by the meaty thwack of Gemnez's red-nailed fist against his chest.

The air in Hedrenatherax's lungs burst out explosively as he was hurled backwards by the force of Gemnez's blow. The horned devil disliked using such crude methods, but sometimes nothing but a direct physical threat would convey his message.

Hedrenatherax was struggling to rise from his ignoble sprawl, still stunned by the unholy speed of Gemnez's attack, but the great devil slammed him back down with the weight of one colossal foot.

"Now listen to me, Hedrenatherax. I dislike repeating myself." Gemnez increased the pressure on the balor's chest to drive home his point. "You are to leave here and find a babau. He will appear somewhat different from the rank and file. Possibly larger, or his coloring may be different. Find him and bring him here. Do not slay him, or you will answer to me." Gemnez stared into Hedrenatherax's eyes, eyes that burned with absolute hatred. Twice now Gemnez had humiliated the balor, a fact that surely left an indelible stamp upon the mighty demon's ego. "Do you understand?" Gemnez finished softly. He was rewarded with a silent nod of the balor's head.

Gemnez removed his foot from Hedrenatherax's chest and allowed him to rise. He felt the heat of the balor's rage. For an instant, he thought that the demon might attack him, and he would lose a very valuable servant. But Hedrenatherax simply turned away and stalked from the pleasure chamber, most likely to vent his rage on some hapless lesser demon.

Gemnez sighed again and returned to the comfort of his mountain of soiled cushions. He knew that his hold over Hedrenatherax was a tenuous one, but it would hold for as long as it was needed. The balor feared Pyrak even more than he hated Gemnez, and failure to contain the menace of this faithless petitioner would mean certain doom for the balor. But Gemnez had convinced Hedrenatherax that Pyrak would be much more pleased with the conservation of this new resource than its destruction. Therefore, he had little doubt that the Hedrenatherax would carry out his orders, if doing so was within the balor's power.

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The huge devil settled back in his cushions and closed his eyes once more. Visions of power and change danced before Gemnez, and he allowed himself the small indulgence of dreaming.

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A streak of flame cut across the gangrenous colors of the Abyssal sky, growing longer with each beat of two great leathery wings. The mighty Hedrenatherax soared with a casual elegance, in complete command of his powerful, lethal body. The huge fiend fumed as he flew, his rage a palpable force, manifesting in a crackling nimbus of green flame about his body.

Never in all the millennia of his existence had he been so humbled, so utterly humiliated. The great bloated devil Gemnez had done what no enchanted blade or mighty spell could: he had struck at Hedrenatherax's greatest weakness and wounded the balor deeply.

Gemnez had taken his pride.

Hedrenatherax was no fool. He knew that that he was not the most powerful creature in the Abyss, and was in fact satisfied to serve those who had achieved greater stature than himself. But, even Pyrak, the master whom he so ably served, left the balor's pride intact. It did not need to be said that the great demon lord could slay Hedrenatherax if he so willed it, there was no need to prove such a thing. Pyrak respected him and his abilities, and this was enough to ensure Hedrenatherax's loyalty, such as it was.

Gemnez, however, was different. He had seen fit to prove his superiority in direct physical confrontation, and not once, but twice. And to add insult to injury, he had allowed the balor to live, to bear the full brunt of his humiliation.

There was little Hedrenatherax could do. He knew he could not defeat Gemnez in a direct confrontation, and if he did not serve the devil, his failure to contain the damned petitioner would reach the ears of Pyrak, all but ensuring his destruction. Never had the balor felt so helpless.

Reduced to little more than Gemnez's errand boy, Hedrenatherax had scoured the area surrounding the spawning pit for any sign of the faithless petitioner who had caused such an uproar.

Hedrenatherax let loose a sudden shriek of rage as the events of the last few days replayed in his mind. The flames around his body burned brighter, answering the heat of his anger. The dretch's escape from the

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Spawning Pit of Gemnez Drak had left the balor sorely wounded, but Gemnez, it seemed, was much more interested in the transformed petitioner's fate than his.

So Hedrenatherax had gone looking for the newly formed dretch, searching in conjunction with Gemnez's babau servants. He had found traces of his quarry very quickly, in the form of four mutilated babau demons in a small ravine, not far from the pit. When Hedrenatherax had brought his finding s back to Gemnez, the devil's interest in the faithless petitioner had begun to resemble an obsession.

Gemnez had ordered Hedrenatherax to search once more, this time alone, as the devil did not wish to endanger anymore of its servants. The balor hadn't understood—and still didn't understand—Gemnez's reasoning for continuing the search. Hedrenatherax wished to simply tell Pyrak that the petitioner had perished in the spawning pit and be done with it. But Gemnez would not be refused, and Hedrenatherax had set out once more to find the being who was quickly coming the bane of his existence.

The domain that belonged to Pyrak was huge and sprawling, yet it consisted of little more than a barren windswept plain and the endless chain of black mountains known as the Onyx Peaks. Hedrenatherax had started his search in the mountains, flying over and between the looming peaks in a crisscrossing pattern. He had covered thousands of square miles of mountains before moving on to the plain that stretched into perpetuity beneath them.

Gemnez had told him that he would be looking for a babau, having divined that the hearts of the four slain babau had likely fueled another transformation in the petitioner. This was not encouraging news. Babau were fairly common demons; no doubt there were millions of them in Pyrak's domain alone.

Further, Hedrenatherax had no reason not to suspect that his quarry had simply moved to another layer of the Abyss or even another plane of existence all together. But he searched nonetheless, for as much as he hated Gemnez he did not wish to rouse the devil's ire again.

The demon flew on, speeding over the lifeless plain like a flaming arrow. His keen eyes scanned the horizon ahead for any sign of movement, but so far he had encountered nothing save the occasional vrock. The vulture demons wanted nothing to do with the balor and fled screeching from the huge fiend as soon as they sighted him.

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Hedrenatherax was beginning to entertain thoughts of ending his search prematurely when his keen eyes picked up a single silhouette, moving slowly on the very edge of the horizon. The figure was on the ground, walking, and as Hedrenatherax grew closer he could make out a definite man-like shape.

Hope flared within the balor as he thundered high over the lone creature's head and saw that it was indeed a babau. Hedrenatherax wheeled his great body with a flip of his massive wings, swinging himself around to make another pass over the slow moving demon below. He knew that babau rarely traveled alone, lacking the power to defend themselves against the more powerful demons in the Abyss. He concluded that he had found his quarry at last.

The petitioner's magic had stung Hedrenatherax twice, once on Abrigor, and once again after its emergence from the spawning pit. He had no desire to suffer that particular humiliation again, and had come prepared. Across Hedrenatherax's broad back was a round shield, large enough to cover a man from neck to knee, but little more than a buckler to the huge demon. It was carved of a single piece of obsidian but, for all its ungainly appearance, was extraordinarily light. Gemnez had given the shield to Hedrenatherax before he left the pit of Gemnez Drak. He called it the *Ebon Ward*, and he had instructed the balor in its use. The shield was powerfully enchanted, said to repel even the mightiest of spells.

Hedrenatherax unbuckled the shield's strap from his chest as he homed in on his prey, deftly maneuvering it in mid air so that it rested upon his left wrist. He then plucked the ever-present sword from his kilt and took it firmly in his right hand. Gemnez had instructed the balor not to kill the petitioner, but he was not about to risk his own skin if the battle was going against him.

With a burst from his mighty wings, Hedrenatherax plunged headlong into a dive towards the babau. The smaller demon seemed oblivious to his presence and plodded on slowly, head down. Hedrenatherax filled his lungs with stale Abyssal air and loosed a savage howl as he descended, sword drawn back for a killing strike.

* * * * *

The lone babau trudged solemnly across a barren landscape of cracked dry earth, buffeted by howling winds. Behind the gaunt fiend a range

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of black mountains thrust insolently up into the blasphemous green sky. Ahead stretched only nothing.

Hazergal had left his small ravine days ago, fleeing into the Abyssal night shortly after slaying the four babau whose hearts he had consumed. The pain of his most recent metamorphosis was a haunting phantom, an irrational fear that drove him recklessly on. His perilous journey through the mountains had finally led him here, to the barren wind-swept plane that now stretched on infinitely before him

The wind howled around him like a banshee, digging claws of blasting sand into his skin and deafening him with its constant keening. But he was heedless of the noise or pain, and simply occupied himself with putting one foot in front of the other. He had found his new body far superior to that of his most recent form, stronger, faster and much tougher. The change had, in addition, added a host of new abilities to his already staggering array of powers, but all this did little to soothe the despair that hammered deeper into him with each footfall.

He had forgotten his own name.

This revelation had struck him soon after his transformation into a babau. His memory had drained away like so much water through a sieve, leaving only the faintest traces of self. The agony of knowing that he *had been* more—that a lifetime of experiences now beyond his grasp—was maddening. The demon that was once a man knew that the flesh holding his mind was not his own. It felt alien and coarse, as if his thoughts and soul were unused to the confines of his own body.

He had traced the length of his remaining memory a hundred times, hoping that at its end there might be some inkling of what lay beyond the invisible barrier of amnesia. He remembered the plane of Abrigor, his capture by Hedrenatherax, and the floating citadel of the winged demon lord. He remembered the terrible pit of Gemnez Drak, the burning stench of the spawning pit just before he pierced its hellish green surface, and the terrible pain that had followed. He remembered the pain of that first transformation, the horrid realization of his new body and the growing emptiness that had sprung to being within his soul. He remembered his flight from Gemnez Drak, the small ravine where he had sought sanctuary, and finally his most recent change.

His former life had been stolen from him, leaving in its place only fear, doubt, and loss.

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Dazed with despair, Hazergal trudged on, experiencing his new body with a detached interest. The babau form, although strange, lent him a raw physical power that had sorely been lacking in his dretch body. He had taken to augmenting his physical power with his magic, the better to vent his frustration on those who challenged him in more personal way. Such was the fate of the two vrocks who had sought to make a meal of him the day before. The two vulture demons had descended from the sky in a screeching tornado of talons and feathers, reckless with the anticipation of easy prey. Hazergal had seen and heard them coming from miles away and had cast an array of spells upon himself to increase his strength, agility, and endurance. He had also cast a number of protection and warding spells, to thwart the slashing talons and beaks of his foes.

Hazergal had simply waited for the vrocks to draw near and then torn them to pieces, with a relish he could scarcely understand. And just as he had done with the four babau in the ravine, he had torn open the vrock's bodies and eaten their stinking hearts, moving like a creature in a dream, barely aware of his own actions. When he had come to his senses again, covered in gore and feathers, he was relieved to see that he had not changed again and remained a babau. But his relief was quickly extinguished by a rasping, atonal voice that had suddenly filled his head. *Seek the fiend of the pit,* the voice had boomed, thrumming with power and malevolence. Then, once that single phrase was uttered, it had disappeared, leaving him empty and alone.

For a long time he'd just sat there, dazed and reeling. There had to be some greater meaning to the cryptic message planted in his mind. He just had to puzzle it out. The answer came to him suddenly. The image of the massive form of Gemnez, the infernal master of the pit of Gemnez Drak, filled his mind. Then he dismissed it. He could not imagine why in all the worlds he would wish to return there. The voice in his mind, he decided, was nothing more than an extension of his rapidly failing sanity.

He'd risen to his feet, and then moved on.

Hazergal had walked for what seemed an eternity, the landscape never changing, only the infrequent dawning of the Abyssal night to separate day from day. He felt neither hunger nor thirst. His demonic body had no need of mundane sustenance, but the lack of such concerns only left his mind free to agonize over all he had suffered and lost.

The wind never let up here, shrieking constantly over the fractured

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plain, blocking out all but the most invasive noises. Hazergal had to rely upon his eyes, which had grown much keener, to spot potential dangers.

Now. his keen eyes spotted the flaming body of Hedrenatherax streaking towards him across the sky. Even above the wailing wind, he could hear the demon's furious howl.

Hazergal recognized the balor instantly. A seething rage gripped him at the sight of his tormentor. Chanting louder than the moan of the wind, he called out words of arcane power. Hazergal felt strength and power flow into his body at the completion of each spell. He became stronger, faster, and the long talons upon his hands glowed blue with eldritch flame. Hazergal had time for a mere handful of spells before Hedrenatherax was upon him.

But this time, he did not attempt to strike at the balor from a distance. He wanted to get close and feel his claws sink into the demon's flesh. Hazergal realized he had little chance of overcoming the balor in hand to hand combat, but at least he could inflict some misery of his own before succumbing once again to the void.

Like a great flaming missile, Hedrenatherax arrowed towards Hazergal, shield raised, sword drawn back to end the conflict in a single blow. Hazergal waited, standing calmly as the balor descended. He waited until he could fell the heat of the demon's body flames and then simply sat down. The great fiend was unable to slow his dive and felt a searing pain rip through his left wing as he passed over his foe. The smaller demon had reached up as the balor thundered overhead and let his long talons slash his enemy's wing, using Hedrenatherax's own momentum to drive the ragged claws through the leathery membrane.

Hedrenatherax wheeled crazily in the air as his left wing crumpled to his side. He slammed into the ground a good fifty yards away in a towering spray of dirt and flame. With a bestial howl of triumph Hazergal jumped to his feet and raced over to the fallen balor.

As the smaller demon reached Hedrenatherax, he was struggling to rise from the small crater he had created on impact. The balor had risen to his hands and knees, his mangled wing hanging over his body like a shroud. He heard the pounding of Hazergal's taloned feet approaching and turned his head to see the crazed babau leaping towards him, talons extended.

Hazergal landed upon Hedrenatherax's back, letting his magically hardened claws sink deep into the balor's flesh. Black ichor burst from the

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wound, burning Hazergal with its poisonous heat, but still he clung like an enraged cat and raked. Hedrenatherax bellowed in pain and surged to his feet, arcing his back spasmodically and flinging Hazergal to the ground. The babau rolled lithely and sprang right back to his feet to charge again at the wounded balor.

Despite the crash landing, Hedrenatherax had managed to hang on to his sword. But his shield, the *Ebon Ward*, had been knocked from his grasp. The balor took his blade in both hands as Hazergal surged towards him, and awaited the smaller demon's charge. The babau was not well versed in the hand-to-hand combat, and had relied mostly on luck or vastly superior strength to win the battles he had fought in the last few days. His opponent, on the other hand, was a veteran of countless confrontations, and had emerged victorious from all but a scant few.

Hedrenatherax aimed a vicious sidelong cut at the smaller demon's head as he raced in, a blow which he purposely telegraphed, causing the inexperienced Hazergal to duck. The balor let his blade pass over the babau's head as Hazergal's talons reached out to gut him, he then reversed the arc of his stroke without turning his wrists, bringing the blunt unsharpened edge of his blade against the babau's skull with a ringing crack.

Hazergal went down like a felled ox, his knees buckling as he crashed to the ground. Hedrenatherax snorted in derision, wondering why he had ever feared this pathetic wretch. It had succumbed to a single blow of his sword. The huge balor walked off a short distance to retrieve the *Ebon Ward*, which had skittered a dozen paces away. He picked up the shield and strapped it to his wrist once more, and then turned back to his fallen enemy.

Hedrenatherax's eyes grew wide as he saw Hazergal had climbed to his knees and was pointing one thin taloned finger towards him. The words of a spell dripped from his mouth like venom. Hedrenatherax was too far away to stop the casting. He watched horrified as a frosty blue line of magical energy lanced out towards him. Reflexively, the balor brought up his shield.

Gemnez had not lied about its properties. The ray struck the shield's mirrored surface. For a moment, Hedrenatherax felt a chill so intense it sucked the breath from his lungs and caused the flames about his body to shrink away. He felt the shield grow cool against his skin. Then, the spell simply dissipated harmlessly, its power negated by the *Ebon Ward.*

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Hazergal's mouth fell open in shock, but Hedrenatherax wasted no time in counting his blessings. He thundered across the scant distance between himself and his foe. The babau, still dazed from the blow to his head, attempted to rise to his feet, but was far too slow to react to the balor's descending sword. The blunt edge of Hedrenatherax's blade crashed into the fragile place between Hazergal's neck and shoulder. There was a sickening crack of bone as the force of the blow driving the babau to the ground.

Hazergal lay motionless, wracked by spiraling waves of pain. His collarbone was broken, and he could feel the fractures in his skull. Victory at hand, Hedrenatherax did not waste his advantage. His sword rose and fell twice more, the last blow sending Hazergal finally into unconsciousness.

The battle was won. Hedrenatherax sighed deeply and tested his injured wing. It had almost healed thanks to the supernatural speed at which his body repaired itself. He would be able to fly in a few minutes and carry his prize back to Gemnez.

The balor looked down at the unconscious babau. He was sorely tempted to turn his sword around, cleave the troublesome creature's head from its body, and be done with it. But Hedrenatherax simply sighed again, hanging the sword at his belt. Gemnez had a long reach. To thwart the devil's wishes would surely lead to his own destruction.

Hedrenatherax stooped and plucked Hazergal from the ground. Throwing the babau over his shoulder, the balor spread his wings and leapt into the air. Once again, he would deliver Hazergal to the pit of Gemnez Drak.

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Pyrak glared up into a sky darkened by the flight of a thousand black-fletched arrows. The missiles fell among his horde like jagged rain, each barb enchanted to unerringly seek out demonic flesh. Howls of pain arose as scores of minor demons succumbed to the cloud of arrows. In some areas, more powerful fiends had conjured walls of magical force or other eldritch defenses to deflect the incoming missiles. But the sorcery placed upon the arrowheads was strong, and each volley still managed to find many targets.

Ebony arrow-shafts glanced off Pyrak's body to litter the ground around him He stood statue-like at the front of his army,. The demon lord was angry beyond reckoning. For three days the iron tower of Karagg'Var had held his horde at bay. The bearded devils that lined its nigh impregnable walls were inflicting heavy casualties with their great black bows and seemingly endless supply of enchanted arrows.

Pyrak had attacked the keep in all the conventional ways. He had first attempted to take it by air. He'd led his vrocks over the iron walls of the fortress in an attempt to gain a foot-hold behind them, thereby allowing him to attack the fortification from within and without. To his dismay, Pyrak had found that his vrocks made excellent targets for the barbazu archers. He had lost dozens of his favored demons before turning back in utter defeat.

Storming the keep using his ground forces proved no better, as once again the barbazu shot his ranks to tatters before he could get close enough to begin a proper siege. In addition, more powerful devils lobbed balls of fire or blasts of freezing cold into his advancing horde, slaying his demons in droves and engineering incapacitating confusion.

Along the great ragged line of Pyrak's horde, the air shimmered beneath the strain of hundreds of spells being loosed at once. Between volleys of arrows from the keep, the demons returned fire with all manner of offensive magic. Fire, ice, and acid all rained down upon the keep and its defenders. But all of this arcane might had little effect beyond slaying a few of the barbazu archers and scarring the already battle-worn walls of

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Karagg'Var. Pyrak was now locked in a deadly stalemate, unable to break the tower's defenses but unwilling to admit defeat.

Brooding untouched amidst the carnage of his front line, Pyrak leaned upon his greatsword *Fiendbleeder* and watched his horde dwindle. More demons fell around him with each passing minute. His marilith general, Heskera ,lay coiled behind him, beneath the protection of a transparent magical barrier. She feared to approach him, but had little choice. One of their vrock scouts had brought back news of great importance.

Heskera uncoiled from where her serpentine body had lain wound in a low, tight circle, and slithered up to her liege. She moved cautiously, slowly, like a hunter approaching a wounded animal. The sorcerous barrier she had erected moved with her, blurring her form

"My lord!" Heskera called, forced to yell thanks to the ungodly din of thousands upon thousands of demons locked in unrelenting battle.

Pyrak swiveled his head with a snap, his burning red orbs finding his general's face with the faultless accuracy of a great hunting bird. Heskera cowered reflexively as Pyrak stared at her, and found that she could not keep her gaze from the great naked sword that the demon lord clutched in his taloned hands.

"What is it?" the demon lord hissed. "I hope you have something pleasant to report."

Heskera swallowed a venomous squirt of bile that had suddenly arisen in her throat, and prepared herself for the worst. "No, my liege. I do not. An army of devils numbering at least one hundred thousand is on the march from the Bronze Citadel." Heskera managed to keep her head up and meet her lord's gaze after delivering her news, a feat of will that had the powerful demoness literally shaking with effort.

Suddenly, the familiar brooding anger fled Pyrak's eyes. In its stead came a cold, calculating stare. Relief flooded through Heskera as she recognized the mind of *Fiendbleeder,* staring at her through her master's eyes. The sword seemed to subsume Pyrak's will at its leisure, and Heskera did not always know who she was addressing when she spoke to the great vrock.

"Who leads this army of devils?"

The voice that issued from Pyrak's throat was not his own. It was hollow and flat, as if being relayed across a great distance.

"Beyemon himself leads them," Heskera answered instantly, hoping

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news of one of Pyrak's greatest rivals would shift the attention away from her. Odd as it seemed, she felt much safer in *Fiendbleeder's* presence than Pyrak's. The sword lacked the erratic and explosive anger that was ever present in its demonic wielder. It could, at least, be counted on not to kill anything that displeased it.

"There is more… my lord, " Heskera continued. She hesitated. The marilith was never sure if Pyrak's honorifics were appropriate when *Fiendbleeder* was in control. "Beyemon has with him a wing of azodaemons, surely loaned to him from Graxus himself."

Crimson flashed in Pyrak's eyes as he fought to regain control of his own body. The demon lord shuddered, resuming control of his body, perhaps with a great act of will, or perhaps because *Fiendbleeder* had simply finished with him, and had willingly withdrawn. Whatever the case, Pyrak was once again in control and he slammed the point of *Fiendbleeder* deep into the hard packed soil and loomed over his general, talons opening and closing spasmodically. "*When?*" the demon lord hissed, his rage held in check by a colossal feat of self-control.

Heskera shrank back, her hands gliding down to the hilts of her long swords, a reflexive action that would be ultimately useless if Pyrak chose to attack. But he merely waited for her answer, the tide of his anger subdued enough to allow rational thought and action

The demon lord's anger was no mystery to Heskera. The most lopsided defeat Pyrak had ever suffered throughout his many years of raiding in Avernus had come at the hands of Beyemon. And he had been aided by a wing of azodaemons, just as he was now.

The azodaemons were neither devil nor demon, but belonged to a wholly different race of fiends known simply as daemons. Hailing from the burning peaks of Gehenna, a plane fraught with fire and never ending night, Azodaemons were mercenaries supreme. Willing to fight for whoever paid the price, they often served both demon and devil in their perpetual conflict.

Beyemon was fond of using azodaemon mercenaries to bolster the ranks of his armies and to serve in a very specialized role his own forces could not fulfill. Great winged fiends, azodaemons were masters of the air, dominating the skies on giant bat-like wings. They provided Beyemon's armies with much-needed aerial support from above. In combat they were nearly unmatched in their element, with powerful grasping talons and a

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true love of carnage that rivaled even that of the most depraved demon. They were easily a match for Pyrak's vrocks and—although he would never admit it—usually emerged victorious in conflicts between the two fiends.

"They will be here in less than a day," Heskera said, answering her liege with a bow of her head.

Pyrak did not answer. Instead he turned abruptly, snatching *Fiendbleeder* from its earthy interment and sheathing the sword in the scabbard that hung from his back in one fluid motion. Arrows still fell about the two fiends, deflecting from Heskera's magical barrier and from Pyrak's near impregnable hide. The demon lord was oblivious to the rain of missiles as he looked down the lines of his horde. His eyes were distant, as if he were deep in thought, but Heskera knew better.

The marilith waited patiently for Pyrak's orders, arms folded across her chest. She feared that, in his obsession to take Karagg'Var, Pyrak would not order a retreat. They would face Beyemon's army, pinned between the fortress's archers and the archdevil's legions. She quickly decided that if such were her lord's orders she would not remain for such a slaughter, no matter what the consequences.

"So close, so close…" Pyrak's voice drifted through the din as he stood, surveying the destruction wrought upon his horde. He turned slowly to his general, an odd look filling his bestial features. Heskera was taken aback by the presence of obvious regret on the face of her master.

"In two thousand years, I have never been so close as now." Pyrak's voice wavered as he spoke. "I am so tired of failure, Heskera, so tired of leading armies into this stinking plane, only to be pushed back to start the whole process over again." Depths of incalculable sorrow dulled the fire of the demon lord's eyes, and his voice seemed to rise with the emotion.

"But I cannot stop!" He threw his head back, bellowing. "It wont let me stop…"

Pyrak trailed off. Heskera saw that *Fiendbleeder* had taken her lord's mind again, quelling whatever rebellion had arisen within the powerful fiend. When Pyrak spoke again, it was the sword's words that issued from his mouth.

"Take the horde and lead them back through the gate," *Fiendbleeder's* voice commanded. "Leave me the Dreadwings and I will halt Beyemon's advance so that you may escape with most of the horde intact."

Heskera nodded and slithered away. What she had just seen left her

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mind reeling. How long had Pyrak been a prisoner in his own body? The agony that had shown through in that bare instant, when Pyrak had expressed his frustration, was enough to shock even a demoness. In all the horrors she had seen and committed in her long years, the marilith had never seen even the lowliest of creatures so helpless, and in such pain, as she had seen the powerful demon lord. Fiendbleeder held Pyrak in utter impotence, and for all his might, he seemed incapable of breaking the sword's hold over him.

Heskera, of course, felt no sympathy for her master—she was unable to even conceive of such a thing—but she did see opportunity in the demon lord's obvious weakness. The marilith had no idea how she might be able to use what she had learned, but it was an important piece of information that might prove useful later on. Such was the way of the Abyss: exploit or be exploited.

Heskera moved to the rear of the horde, where the lesser demons had congregated in search of shelter from the bearded devils' arrows. She would break the horde up in stages, so as not to give away their retreat until the last moment. The marilith slithered over to a babau and relayed her orders.

The tall skeletal demons were usually given the command of lesser fiends on the battlefield, each one controlling over a thousand dretch or other minor demons. The babau she had spoken to began the arduous task of rounding up its near mindless charges and leading them back to the planar gate. Meanwhile, Heskera continued down the length of the horde, giving the same order to each of the babau she encountered. Soon, a large portion of Pyrak's forces was in full retreat.

Heskera was not idle while the horde broke apart; she cast powerful illusion spells at varying intervals along the length of the horde. Each spell replaced the fleeing demons she had released with exact illusionary counterparts. This way, the devils would not notice the horde's retreat until it was too late to get word to Beyemon. In addition, the illusion spells would keep the more powerful demons from abandoning the horde prematurely; once they sensed a lost cause, their chaotic natures would drive them to seek better opportunities elsewhere.

The first part of her task done, Heskera moved back to the front lines to aid the siege effort with her own magic and further enforce the falsehood of a continued campaign. As she neared the ragged front line, she saw Pyrak, still standing in the same place she had left him hours

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before. The demon lord had taken *Fiendbleeder* from its sheathe again. He leaned upon the great blade, his wings extended to cover it in an oddly protective manner.

What magnificent irony, Heskera mused. The very thing that tormented him was the only thing that granted him the power to rule among his own kind. Heskera could feel the respect she had once carried for her lord suddenly evaporate, leaving in its place only the overwhelming need to use Pyrak's weakness against him.

Soon, she thought as she reached the front line and prepared a lightning spell to launch at the walls of Karagg'Var. *Soon.*

* * * * *

Avernus trembled.

Beyemon's army thundered across the scorched earth of Infernium's first plane in an avalanche of infernal power, shaking the ground with the tread of thousands. One hundred legions of devils, all arrayed in tight battle formation, flowed behind the great pit fiend as he—resplendent in scarlet cloak and his own blood red battle armor—led his troops to battle.

They had marched nonstop from Beyemon's Bronze Citadel and would reach their destination within the hour. The fortress of Karagg'Var was under siege by a vast horde of interloping demons, a horde led by one of Beyemon's most hated rivals, the demon lord Pyrak.

Reports from advance scouts had confirmed that Pyrak's horde had already destroyed one infernal army led by Medregog, one of Beyemon's most trusted generals. Medregog himself had been slain in the battle, a blow to the great pit fiend's pride he would not let go unpunished.

Beyemon doubted that even Pyrak would be able to take the fortress of Karagg'Var, for it was heavily defended and near impregnable. Nevertheless, the fact that the demon lord had even dared to strike at such an important fortification was more than enough to rouse his ire and motivate him to become personally involved.

The first time Beyemon had battled Pyrak, he had nearly met his death in the melee. Had it not been for his loyal troops dragging him to safety, he surely would have fallen. Before that battle, Beyemon had not expected any demonic foe to be as organized and as effective as the horde had been under Pyrak's command.

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In the centuries that he had ruled Avernus, Beyemon had crushed hundreds of Abyssal armies beneath the well-oiled discipline of his infernal forces. But he had been overwhelmed by Pyrak's firm grasp of tactics and ability to utilize his chaotic troops to the best of their abilities.

In that first battle, Beyemon had led his twenty legions of bearded devils—supported by five units of elite barbed devils—against a force of demons nearly twice the size of his own army. The numerical disadvantage had mattered little to the arch devil. He had bested much larger hordes with less troops. But he had never faced Pyrak before, and he would soon learn that the demon lord was no rank amateur at planar warfare.

The battle had started as Beyemon had expected, with a huge mob of demons charging his arrayed formations. The mob had slammed into his army with little effect, unable to breach the wall of glaives and pikes arrayed before them. But then, Pyrak had skillfully unleashed his cadre of half-fiend juggernauts. Dispatched in a wedge-shaped formation, the creatures had crushed the lines of bearded devils, ripping a hole in the left flank of Beyemon's army. The Abyssal mob had poured in after the giants, quickly filling the gap Pyrak's monstrosities had left with battle hungry demons. The long glaives and pikes of Beyemon's bearded devils had been rendered ineffective by the close quarters. Instead, they had been forced to abandon their weapons and fight hand to hand with the horde of demons that ripped and clawed among them.

It had been a complete slaughter.

Stunned at the unprecedented offensive, Beyemon had begun to sound the retreat. But before he could act the sky above his position suddenly darkened, and a rain of feathered death fell upon his personal entourage. Pyrak and a wing of his vrocks had managed to sneak over to Beyemon's position with the aid of a few cunning illusion spells and the distraction of the battle. Beyemon and his honor guard of horned devils had found themselves fighting for their lives, completely surrounded by Pyrak and vulture-headed ilk.

Beyemon and his horned devils had regrouped as quickly as they could in an attempt to fight their way out. They had nearly made it through the tangle of feathered demons when Pyrak himself had swept down from the sky like a whirling cyclone of steel and blood. With two swipes of Pyrak's great blade, the horned devils nearest Beyemon had been cut down, leaving the archdevil alone to face this awesome foe.

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The Lord of the First was no coward. He had taken up his own blood red falchion and joined combat with the mighty demon lord. He remembered slashing at Pyrak furiously, only to find that he could not penetrate the net of steel woven by the demon's monstrous sword.

Beyemon had found himself quickly giving ground to Pyrak. The demon lord took the offensive and began to bat the arch-devil's defenses aside with frightening ease. The pain of that first wound, as Pyrak's blade crashed through his defenses to carve into his flesh, left a mark upon Beyemon's mind that he would never forget. The single sword-stroke brought an agony so bright that it blotted out all thought and reason, and Beyemon had heard a thick, rasping voice drone horribly within his mind. *Die devil! Die! Die! Die!*

The pit fiend's last coherent memory of that battle was Pyrak looming above him, his great sword growing larger and larger as it descended for the killing strike.

But luck had been with Beyemon that day, One of his horned devils had managed to fight through the throng of vrocks. The brave devil had used his own body to deflect Pyrak's killing blow, slamming into the demon lord so that his blade went awry and struck the ground next to Beyemon's head. By that time, ten legions of reinforcements had arrived from Karagg'Var to join the battle, allowing what remained of Beyemon's honor guard to drag him to safety during the ensuing confusion created by the newly arrived devils.

The memory of that day had festered within Beyemon for decades. Pyrak had eventually been defeated and driven back into the Abyss, but the fact that he had nearly killed the reigning lord of Avernus had not gone unnoticed. Pyrak had returned a dozen times since than, each time pushing further and further into the plane. The demon lord had been stopped each time by a superior force of devils, but Beyemon was never among them. Rumors of the archdevil's cowardice had sprung up alongside those of Pyrak's indestructibility, and soon the demon lord and his great blade were infamous among the devils of Avernus. Beyemon ached for a chance to crush any doubt of his bravery and battle prowess, and saw the perfect opportunity to do so in Pyrak's current siege of Karagg'Var.

By catching Pyrak off guard, the pit fiend hoped to pin him between the Infernal army and the iron walls of the fortress. He had assembled a force of devils that was truly staggering in size, but Beyemon was not one

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to take unnecessary chances. Therefore, he had taken steps to ensure his victory. The arch devil had made use of an alliance he had forged long ago with Graxus, a powerful daemon lord.

The mercenary daemons, which thrived upon the bleak plane of Gehenna, often served in infernal armies, but Beyemon could command a far greater number of the fickle fiends than any of his compatriots. Beyemon had provided Graxus a force of elite devils to thwart a coup on the great daemon's home plane, and in doing so had gained a unique and powerful ally. Graxus had given Beyemon a wing of azodaemons to serve him in the upcoming battle. The great pit fiend hoped the winged daemons would cancel out Pyrak's air superiority and bring the battle to the ground, where his larger force of devils would decide the day.

And there was one final element that Beyemon hoped would tip the odds in his favor. For this excursion he had forgone his familiar falchion for another, more powerful weapon—a weapon loaned to him by Asmodeus himself.

Balanced over one armored shoulder the pit fiend carried a massive spear, fully twenty feet long, with a rather plain, serrated iron head. The shaft of the weapon was pitch black, inscribed with a number of powerful and very ancient magical runes. It was called *Dreadskewer,* and like Pyrak's weapon *Fiendbleeder* it existed for a single purpose: to destroy fiends.

By while Fiendbleeder's aim was the annihilation of devils, *Dreadskewer* was anathema to demons. It was said that the barest scrape of its iron head would bring death to any demon. With *Dreadskewer* in his grasp, Beyemon felt invulnerable.

The impending clash with Pyrak was about much more than simple revenge, or even the eternal conflict between devil and demon itself. Something far more important hinged upon its outcome. Beyemon's position as Lord of the First Layer of Hell was in jeopardy.

The archdevil had been losing prestige steadily ever since his first battle with Pyrak, and a growing list of dissidents weighed heavy on his mind. If he did not prove himself here, then there would be little hope of fighting off the waves of would-be usurpers who would seek to take advantage of his weakened status.

The reality of the matter was very simple. Either Beyemon would return to the Bronze Citadel with Pyrak's head on a pike, or he would not return all.

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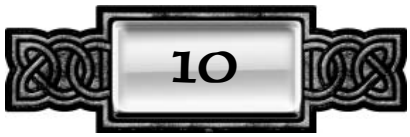

He is coming, my lord, the sword *Fiendbleeder* droned within Pyrak's mind. It mocked him with the honorific. *I want to taste his blood again, so sweet, so powerful.*

Pyrak refused to acknowledge *Fiendbleeder*; it had been babbling incessantly ever since the retreat from Karagg'Var. He felt the sword's eagerness twisting like a serpent through his soul. It had been a long time since Fiendbleeder had tasted the blood of a truly unique devil, and its hunger was overwhelming.

Although Pyrak remained in control of his body, the sword's desires thrummed through him, filling his own consciousness with their power. *Fiendbleeder* wanted Beyemon. It would not let Pyrak leave Avernus until he had cleaved the archdevil's head from his body or been destroyed in the attempt.

Pyrak stood virtually alone in the grim heat of Avernus. A few miles from Karagg'Var, he awaited Beyemon and his army. Above the demon lord the sky was dark with thousands of wheeling vrocks. The winged demons were Pyrak's elite, his Dreadwings. Only they stood with him against Beyemon and his army of devils.

Pyrak had long since sent the rest of his horde through the planar gate, back to the Abyss and the safety of his domain. He wanted nothing more than to join his demons and quit this ceaseless conflict, but *Fiendbleeder* would not allow it. The sword had not nearly glutted its desire for infernal blood. The prospect of slaying the very lord of Avernus was simply too great an opportunity, no matter what the cost.

Pyrak reluctantly focused his attention on *Fiendbleeder* and spoke at last to the sword's desires. *You must let me handle Beyemon,* he reminded the sword. *I know what motivates him; I will need every ounce of my own will to accomplish what you desire.*

Never! the blade replied. *You want to run. I can feel it within you, demon. If I let you have what you propose then you will flee.*

No. I will not. But if you do not let me have complete control, I will fight you every step of the way, and Beyemon will slay me.

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Pyrak delivered his threat without hesitation; he meant every word of it. *And there you will be, the great* Fiendbleeder, *in the hands of an archdevil. Destined to wile away the eons in some long forgotten treasure vault, while your enemies only grow stronger.* The barb was sharp, and Pyrak knew that it had scored deep.

You're bluffing. You have no wish to die, the sword answered after a long spate of silence.

Pyrak could sense the doubt in *Fiendbleeder's* voice and pushed his advantage. *You know every inch of my mind, every thought I have ever had. Do you not?*

Yes, I know you, demon. Suspicion echoed with the droning rasp of *Fiendbleeder's* words. It knew what was coming next.

Then tell me. Am I bluffing?

In the long silence that followed that question, Pyrak realized his victory. He felt *Fiendbleeder* pulling back, until the sword became nothing more than the barest hint of a whisper in the back of his mind. For the first time in a very long while Pyrak felt alone, and he reveled in the sensation.

Pyrak heard Beyemon's approach long before he caught sight of the enormous army the archdevil led. The ground shook as the vast force of devils marched, and the fell voices of infernal commanders barking orders drifted to Pyrak's ears in the still air of Avernus.

"Dreadwings! To me!" Pyrak bellowed. At his command the cloud of vrocks overhead sped ground-ward and landed behind their master *en masse*.

From the horde of feathered demons a single tall, battle-scarred vrock emerged and stalked confidently up to its master. The demon differed from the rest of the Dreadwings in its cobalt blue feathers, and its choice of weapons. It carried a massive spiked morningstar over one shoulder, and great slung longbow over the other. The vrock stood patiently to one side of Pyrak, waiting for him to acknowledge its presence.

"What is on your mind, Grimclaw?" Pyrak finally said to the large vrock.

"Master, I am concerned," the big vrock began. "What purpose is there to throwing our lives away here? The war effort will not be served by this course of action."

Pyrak smiled inwardly. He had always respected Grimclaw's forthrightness and general lack of fear. Of all the demon lord's servants,

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the leader of the Dreadwings was his favorite. Grimclaw lacked the puling subservience of many of his other servants—namely Heskera—and a genuine respect existed between Pyrak and the big vrock.

"Worry not, Grimclaw. I will not sacrifice my finest warriors needlessly," Pyrak said. "I require your presence for effect, nothing more."

"I do not understand," Grimclaw said with a shake of his avian head, and he moved to stand in front of his liege. "An army of Infernals, led by Beyemon, will be in here within a few moments. An army that we cannot hope to defeat."

"That is true," Pyrak answered flatly.

Grimclaw's eyes filled with puzzlement at Pyrak's answer. "Pyrak, I have served you for longer than I can remember, and in all that time I have never questioned you. But now I fear that you are intending something that will jeopardize all we have strived for, and I do not understand why."

Pyrak looked down at Grimclaw, who although large for a vrock, was still dwarfed by his master. It was true Grimclaw had served him flawlessly for nearly eight centuries. A quiet nobility lurked within the vrock, a quality that was as rare in the Abyss as rain in a desert. Pyrak had come to rely on that nobility, and unlike most of his contemporaries, found it an admirable trait.

Pyrak reached out one huge taloned hand and laid it upon Grimclaw's shoulder, a bizarre gesture that caught the vrock off guard, causing him to flinch as if expecting an attack. In response Pyrak snatched his hand back awkwardly and a flash of anger flared within the demon lord's eyes.

Grimclaw's rebuff had angered him and he wasn't completely sure why. Pyrak wanted to reach for Fiendbleeder and hack the architect of his confusion to pieces, thereby destroying any evidence of his displayed weakness. Instead, he spat a reply to the vrock's questioning with as much venom as he could muster.

"Only one creature will lose its life this day, either Beyemon or myself. Does this satisfy you Grimclaw, or do you find further need to question my decisions?" The last was an unmistakable threat and Grimclaw wisely slunk back to the rest of his flock, unwilling to provoke his master's ire further.

Pyrak was left alone once more, while his vrocks milled about behind him, confused and frightened by their lord's odd behavior.

It had been a long time since the demon lord was able to fully explore the confines of his own mind and he was alarmed by what he found there.

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Buried beneath the remnants of *Fiendbleeder's* domination were only regret and loneliness, nothing more. His identity had been so completely merged with the overwhelming personality of *Fiendbleeder* that when left to his own devices, he barely even recognized himself.

Despair swelled within Pyrak. His existence had become a meaningless blur of pointless endeavor, driven recklessly on by the singular and focused madness of the great, intelligent sword across his back.

Pyrak's reverie of self-loathing was broken by the appearance of Beyemon's army, and the demon lord lamented that even if he were to slay the archdevil, it would not free him. His servitude to *Fiendbleeder* was complete and unending.

Beyemon approached in the lead of a razor-straight line of advancing devils. The devil lord wore a suit of blood red plate mail and bore, not his usual falchion, but a great spear with a massive serrated iron head.

Fiendbleeder suddenly broke its silence and loomed large and all encompassing in Pyrak's mind. *'Ware his spear, demon. It is nearly as powerful as I.* There was something strange in that voice, something Pyrak had not heard before. But the sword retreated to the darkness of Pyrak's subconscious immediately after delivering its warning and the demon lord took careful note of Beyemon's weapon.

Beyemon rested the spear on his broad, armored right shoulder, the weapon extending out over his body at an angle like some bizarre antenna. It was composed of a lusterless black metal, save for the dark gray of its iron head. It was obviously intended for two-handed use, even by a fiend as large as Beyemon. Pyrak could see nothing special about it from where he stood, but he had no reason to doubt the veracity of *Fiendbleeder's* warning.

Pyrak heard his vrocks stirring violently behind him as the infernal army drew near. "Do nothing, until I command it!" the demon lord shouted as he turned to address his minions. "If any of you so much as move before my say so, you will die at my hands!" Pyrak spun around to face Beyemon, satisfied that his demons were, for the moment, mollified.

Pyrak watched Beyemon's army pull closer, marveling at the symmetry and precision with which the great mass of devils moved. Beyemon was a brilliant strategist, and his army was simply an extension of his own formidable intellect. He commanded them with an array of verbal and visual signals, from barked orders to colored flags, moving his forces in elegant precision as if simply moving his own body.

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Above the phalanx of devils the sky was dotted with the winged formations of azodaemons, and the airborne fiends wheeled above Beyemon's army in an astonishing display of aerial superiority. Beyemon advanced to some two hundred yards from Pyrak's position and then with a single guttural command in infernal, his army ground to a halt. The bat-like azodaemons did not land, but instead hovered over Beyemon's army in a dense cloud. Pyrak looked out over the tight ranks of his foe and reckoned that he was outnumbered by at least fifty-to-one.

Like his recently slain underling Medregog, Beyemon had a flair for the dramatic and stalked out a few paces from his army to address his enemy. "Interlopers of Avernus!" the archdevil bellowed, whipping his spear from his shoulder and planting it in the ground at his feet with a flourish. "You have defiled the sanctity of this realm for the last time! Submit to this army and the Lords of the Nine and your lives may be spared. Refuse and face my wrath!"

There was glee upon the face of the archdevil as he finished his short speech. Beyemon had finally found himself in a position to crush his rival and cement, once again, his rule in Avernus. Pyrak sighed and drew Fiendbleeder from its scabbard across his back. It was time to find out just how well he knew his opponent. Pyrak held his sword aloft in both hands and boomed his reply.

"Beyemon, Lord of the First!" Pyrak addressed his foe. "I, Pyrak, child of the endless chaos, demand the rite of Hevak Durr!"

Pyrak found no small amusement at the obvious shock that traveled through the archdevil's body at his utterance. The rite of Hevak Durr was an ancient ritual that was as old as the conflict between devil and demon itself. It had not been used for millennia,. Most of the fiends that participated in the endless conflict had forgotten it.

Hevak Durr was a combined word, taken from both the Infernal and Abyssal tongues, that meant "champion's battle." The rite could only be enacted by two willing fiends of great and unique power, one demon and one devil. It bound its practitioners to resolve a battle or dispute by single combat, a frightening proposition for most demon lords and archdevils who valued their own skins above all else.

Clever, demon. Very clever, Fiendbleeder whispered softly, the glee in it voice foaming rabidly behind its hushed tones.

Pyrak watched as a trio of cornugons—likely Beyemon's advisors—

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came forward and huddled about their lord. The great archdevil had not replied to Pyrak's challenge and stood stunned as his minions desperately tried to council him.

The confusion of his foe was no mystery to Pyrak. The archdevil had hoped to confront his foe with the might of his entire army. Pyrak had defeated him easily when last they battled, and it was certain that Beyemon did not want to be at that kind of disadvantage again. But here, he was confronted with an obscure ritual, a challenge to his honor that he could ill afford to dismiss.

Beyemon's initial defeat in his first meeting with Pyrak, coupled with the demon lord's string of successful campaigns into Avernus, had raised many doubts within the devil hierarchy regarding the archdevil's competency. Pyrak had learned through Gemnez that many powerful pit fiends were eyeing the Lord of the First's position and were simply waiting for a nod from the ruling powers of Infernium to strike. Of course, Beyemon was not a fool. He understood very well that his position, and even his continued existence, required a stunning victory to once again prove his worth.

Pyrak was the most obvious choice of trophies for the prestige hungry archdevil and the demon lord's death would easily win him the accolades necessary to maintain his rule. But Pyrak had ruined Beyemon's opportunity for an easy victory by presenting him with a choice he desperately did not want to make.

If Beyemon refused Hevak Durr then he would only confirm the rumors of his fear and weakness, even if his army destroyed Pyrak on the field of battle. The archdevil would soon find himself at the mercy of his enemies, never knowing when that knife in the dark might descend to end his rule and his life. If Beyemon obliged Pyrak's challenge, then he would face the most infamous demonic scourge that had ever set foot into Avernus in single combat. A combat whose prospects hardly favored the archdevil.

The choice was simple: refuse the Hevak Durr and face an enemy he could neither determine or gauge the strength of, or accept and face a battle with an enemy he knew, however dubious the outcome.

The trio of horned devils around Beyemon suddenly withdrew, and Beyemon stood silent for a few moments. Pyrak could almost feel the devil's mind working as he furiously attempted to divine an escape from

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his dilemma. But Pyrak knew his enemy, and he knew what choice he would make.

Showing his back to Pyrak, Beyemon turned to address his army, and for an instant the demon lord thought that his gamble was not as wise as he has suspected. But the archdevil's words quieted the doubt that had arisen in Pyrak's mind.

"Loyal servants of the Nine!" Beyemon cried. "Today you shall witness a great victory for Infernium as I, Beyemon, slay the interloper Pyrak in personal combat!" The archdevil threw his arms wide, as if to embrace the chorus of cheers that burst from his assembled army at his announcement.

Pyrak, who had grounded his weapon while waiting for Beyemon to make his decision, took up his great, naked sword and strode out to meet his adversary. The confused and angry voices of his vrocks followed the demon lord and he smiled at what they had to perceive as utter madness.

Beyemon too had begun the short journey to join his foe in the space that had been created between their two respective armies. Pyrak tried to read the archdevil's features as he drew near, but Beyemon held his thoughts and emotions close. The demon lord could divine nothing from his stony red glare.

"That's quite a weapon you've got there, Beyemon," Pyrak said amiably as he drew within speaking distance of the archdevil. "I didn't even know you could use a spear."

"And use it well, demon. I promise you a closer look at *Dreadskewer* once this foolishness has begun," Beyemon shot back, beaming a confidence that Pyrak knew to be false.

"Then let it begin," Pyrak said. He ran a hand down the naked edge of *Fiendbleeder's* blade, opening up a wide gash that oozed thick rust colored blood. He then held his wounded hand, palm out, to Beyemon. "With my blood I implore the lords of chaos to sanctify this ground."

In reply, Beyemon brought his own taloned extremity to his mouth and raked it across one of his many protruding fangs. The acrid smell of brimstone arose from the cut as he thrust his hand out. "With my blood I appeal to the might of law to sanctify this ground." He then stepped forward and pressed his palm to Pyrak's.

An electric thrill passed through each of the two fiends as their blood mingled, and in unison they continued the ritual. "By the blood of chaos

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and of law our fate shall be decided by combat. Let all who witness bear testament that we go willingly to destruction or triumph."

The world suddenly became still and an odd metallic tang arose on the wind as the powerful magic of the Hevak Durr gathered.

"Duvash mehedrek, Hevak Durr!" both Pyrak and Beyemon bellowed in their combined tongues, spewing forth the final words of power that completed the rite. In response, a flash of brilliant white light burst from the two fiends and spread in a huge fanning arc across both armies. The energy passed through the ranks of devils and demons in seconds, leaving them unharmed and oddly still.

Pyrak stumbled back a dozen paces, dazed from the heady sensation of so much power. He noticed Beyemon too was reeling from their ordeal.

And then for the first time in many days, the demon lord experienced the pervasive stillness of absolute silence.

Both his vrocks and the huge infernal army were silent, frozen still, as if time itself had ceased. The bodies of the collective fiends had been left in whatever position they had been in when the rite of Hevak Durr finished, and they appeared as a mammoth gallery of incredibly life like statues.

Pyrak marveled at the epic power that was contained in the simple rite, but understood the necessity for the strange magic. Now none could interfere with what was about to take place. Neither his demons nor Beyemon's devils could influence the outcome of this duel. Pyrak looked over to Beyemon who stood stunned.

Although both fiends knew of the rite of Hevak Durr, neither of them had ever seen it enacted, and the archdevil now realized that his fate was completely within his own hands. Fear was plainly visible on Beyemon's scaled features as he assumed a fighting stance, crouching low and centering the tip of his spear at Pyrak's chest.

Pyrak took up *Fiendbleeder* and began to circle Beyemon, the massive blade held before him, ready to slap away spear thrusts. Pyrak had battled many devils in his long years, but never had he faced one so desperate as Beyemon surely was.

Close as he was, Pyrak could now see that the spear the archdevil carried was a magnificent weapon, and he recalled *Fiendbleeder's* warning about its power. Pyrak wondered if the spear Beyemon had named *Dreadskewer* was even now staking its claim upon the archdevil's mind, just as *Fiendbleeder* had claimed Pyrak's own.

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The pit fiend made the first move, stepping up quickly and launching a brutal thrust at Pyrak's face. It was only an exploratory jab, and Pyrak knocked the spear point aside almost casually with his own weapon.

Beyemon had the advantage of reach. Pyrak knew that in order to decide the conflict he would have to get inside the archdevil's defenses—no easy matter against such a skilled adversary. In addition, Beyemon was armored in a suit of magnificent red plate mail. The armor was undoubtedly enchanted, and likely could turn aside even a weapon as strong as *Fiendbleeder*. Pyrak noted only one weak spot in Beyemon's formidable defense: he wore no helm.

The battle would be decided by skill at arms alone. Both of the powerful fiends had a vast array of arcane powers, but both were also highly resistant to magical attack, and the time required to prepare such an assault would leave its practitioner very vulnerable.

Pyrak watched Beyemon as they circled round and around, looking for an opening in the archdevil's defenses. Tired of this cautious dance, Pyrak sprang to the offense, rushing forward and whirling his blade in a low arc, knocking the point of Beyemon's spear aside. Pyrak raced up the length of Beyemon's deflected weapon, eager for the killing strike.

But the archdevil was quick. He spun around, bringing the butt of his weapon against Pyrak's skull as he rushed in. Not expecting this attack, Pyrak was sent crashing to the earth by the powerful spinning blow, not seriously injured, but for the moment dazed and vulnerable.

Beyemon did not waste his opportunity and quickly reversed his spear to impale his downed opponent. Pyrak watched the glistening point of *Dreadskewer* descending and realized that he would not be fast enough to parry the weapon with his sword. Desperate, he took one hand off of Fiendbleeder and with more luck than skill snaked his hand up to catch the descending spear just above its deadly tip.

The demon lord yanked savagely on Beyemon's weapon, pulling the archdevil forward while rising to his feet and swinging *Fiendbleeder* one-handed in a wide slash. Pyrak's attack was off balance but he still managed to slam his blade into Beyemon's ribs just below his right arm. The archdevil's breastplate deflected most of the blow, but it knocked him sideways, allowing Pyrak to retreat safely and gather his wits.

Beyemon too retreated, grimacing in pain at the blow dealt to him by *Fiendbleeder's* massive blade. Both combatants stared hard across the thirty

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or so feet that separated them, each trying to find the measure of his foe's courage, and his own.

Wary circling began again as both combatants, now having taken the measure of their opponent's skill. became more cautious. Pyrak, ever the impetuous demon, tired of caution first. He tried once again to rush forward and sweep Beyemon's weapon off line. The archdevil was prepared for the tactic. He simply stepped back and whipped the bladed head of his spear around like a glaive, scoring the first true hit of the combat by ripping his weapon across Pyrak's midsection.

Pain uncoiled in a bright crimson explosion across Pyrak's gut as *Dreadskewer* ripped into his flesh, staining his steel gray plumage with maroon. Pyrak hissed and leapt back, beating his great wings to propel himself away from Beyemon's reach. He landed thirty yards from his foe, the pain of his wound growing into a crescendo of agony. Weakness and nausea boiled up from his injury and Pyrak felt his strength dwindling rapidly.

What's happening!? Pyrak howled at *Fiendbleeder*, who had been conspicuously silent during the battle. The sword rose to the fore of his consciousness in immediate response to the demon lord's summons.

You are poisoned! the blade hissed. *I told you to avoid his weapon. It has powers akin to my own, and was created to destroy those such as you.*

I do not understand! Pyrak screamed back silently. *No poison can affect me!*

None but that created by Dreadskewer, answered *Fiendbleeder*. Its voice was urgent, with none of its usual coldness. *You must slay Beyemon quickly or you will be paralyzed. I can stave off the effects of the toxin temporarily, but you must be quick!*

The great vrock felt *Fiendbleeder* sink back into silence. Some of his strength returned, but he knew he had precious little time to spend on a protracted battle. Beyemon was advancing across the short distance between he and Pyrak, a broad grin creasing his leering gargoyle features.

"How do you fare, demon?" Beyemon called out. "Has *Dreadskewer's* kiss robbed you of your courage?"

As he watched Beyemon advance, a plan born of desperation and his own chaotic nature germinated and gained purchase within his mind. His only reply to Beyemon's mockery was a single piercing screech as he brought *Fiendbleeder* up over his head and charged across the field.

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Pyrak raced forward until he was a mere twenty feet from his opponent. Then he spread his wings and leapt into the air. Beyemon behaved just as Pyrak had hoped, grounding his spear and waiting for the descending demon to impale himself upon it.

The demon lord twisted his body crazily as he came down upon *Dreadskewer*. His aerial gyrations threw off Beyemon's aim. The spear caught the demon lord under his right arm, punching through his flesh and bursting from his back.

The pain was unfathomable, but Pyrak had accomplished his end. As his weight propelled him down the length of *Dreadskewer*, it pinned the weapon in place and effectively disarmed Beyemon. The archdevil opened his mouth to scream, as Pyrak brought *Fiendbleeder* down across his skull with all his weight and considerable strength behind it.

A howl of primal pleasure burst through Pyrak's mind as *Fiendbleeder* bisected Beyemon's head in a great gout of black ichor. Pyrak crashed to the ground, still impaled by *Dreadskewer*, and an instant later Beyemon, Lord of the First, collapsed dead and bleeding beside him.

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Hazergal drifted in a silent void, blissfully unaware of events transpiring beyond his mental domain. Disconnected from everything, even consciousness he existed in a more comfortable state, a restful mindlessness.

Despite the wounds he'd suffered at the hands of Hedrenatherax, there was no physical reason for Hazergal's coma. His demonic form's healing abilities allowed it to recover from the ordeal completely unscathed. But he had not awakened after Hedrenatherax had delivered his limp body into the hands of Gemnez, and had remained insensate and unresponsive despite all the considerable skills of his infernal captor.

The coma-like state was intentional. The pain and confusion of these last weeks had become unbearable. He had forgotten everything of his mortal life. The demonic flesh that now housed his soul was consuming his identity, slowly. The battle with Hedrenatherax had been his limit. Just as Hazergal had trained his mind to command the forces of magic, he now focused his will on maintaining his peaceful oblivion. He refused to return to the waking world and face the horror that his life had become.

So here he remained, in the his own uncharted inner depths. There was naught but darkness and silence here, and that was enough. Time had no meaning, and Hazergal found some sense of peace, however tenuous, in his non-existence.

But Hazergal's respite was not to last. He felt the first tugs of his conscious mind, eager to return him to the world of sight and sound. He fought frantically, resisting the urge to wake. Then, in his struggles, he sensed another presence.

Who are you!? Hazergal screamed into the sightless void. Coherent thought bloomed within the silence as Hazergal flailed about, blindly searching for the alien presence.

I think the proper question is, who are you? the invader answered, its reply an emotionless drone,.

Hazergal suddenly found himself standing in an oddly familiar room. It was obviously a throne room, dominated by a seat of power carved from

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a single block of gold-flecked onyx. The throne sat at the far end of a long narrow hall, highlighted by an immense backdrop of scarlet fabric. The floors were of onyx, like the throne, and polished to a high sheen. Hazergal's gaze drifted to the reflective surface of the floor and saw, to his dread, the leering face of the creature he had become.

Hazergal was not alone in this place, this fabrication of his dreaming mind. A figure sat in arrogant splendor upon the onyx throne, a wry smile twisting his bearded face. The figure and the face were haunting, achingly reminiscent of something terribly vital.

The man on the throne was human, with a well-trimmed black beard and humorless eyes. He stood and spread his arms wide. Then he smiled, allowing his straight white teeth to gleam through the darkness of his beard. Dressed in a loose robe of shimmering black fabric and a wide scarlet cloak, he cut an ominous and potent figure.

"Well, well. This is quite a place you have here," the man said. His words came out in the grim monotonous tone of the intruder.

"What is this place?" Hazergal asked, his eyes darting about the massive hall for anything that might spark his dwindling memory.

The intruder's smile faded and his flat lusterless eyes found and held Hazergal's own. "You must know, I pulled it from *your* mind."

"I don't understand. I have no recollection of this place… nor of you," Hazergal replied.

"How odd," the bearded man said and slumped down into the throne. "You truly have no memory?"

"No! I don't remember *anything*!" Hazergal bellowed, his frustration bursting through. "Now tell me who you are!" He flexed his long talons and made a single threatening step towards the throne.

Hazergal's outburst had not pierced the calm exterior of the intruder. He smiled again, a flat humorless creasing of his lips that conveyed no joy or mirth.

"Who I am is not important, as I have said," the intruder replied, the slightest hint of irritation creeping into the buzzing monotony of his words. "I will say only this: I am one who would see you reach your full potential, realize your destiny, and become what you were meant to be. My reasons I shall not reveal to you now. Know that I could be a very powerful ally or the most dire of enemies." The intruder's eyes blazed momentarily. "The choice is ultimately yours."

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"My potential!? What are you talking about!?" Hazergal raged. "I cannot even remember my own name, and you are blathering on about allies and enemies and my destiny. This is all utter nonsense!" The words to a dozen powerful spells flew to his mind as Hazergal vented, each one capable of reducing his tormentor to vapor, but he kept a firm grip on his anger. Even enraged as he was, the tiniest flame of hope still existed that this stranger might be able to tell him something, anything, about his former life.

"Well then, it seems that this meeting may not have been wasted after all," the intruder said.

"What do you mean?" Hazergal hissed through his clenched fangs.

"I mean, that I can provide you with at least one piece of information you lack"

"What information? More secrets?" Hazergal asked suspiciously.

"No, no more secrets. I will tell you your name, demon."

The rage drained from Hazergal. "Tell me. Please," he whispered, wincing at the pathetic eagerness in his voice.

"As a mortal man, your name was Hazergal. Hazergal Redfist," the intruder said, the smile on his face finally reaching his eyes. "But, you are more than this now, and I believe that name shall soon lose its significance to you."

Hazergal could not hear him. Those three syllables held him, enraptured. "Hazergal…" The word rolled off his tongue like the kiss of long forgotten lover. "My name is Hazergal."

Obviously tiring of Hazergal's self-indulgent reverie, the smile faded from the intruder's face and he stood. "Now, you must awaken and meet your destiny, for good or for ill. Awake, Hazergal. Awake."

Hazergal opened his mouth, meaning to ask one of an endless stream of questions, but the walls of the throne room had begun to fade. Darkness trickled back into his mind like a sluggish stream, and Hazergal struggled to keep hold of rational thought. Then the trickle became a flood, and he fell into the void once more.

But this time, the darkness was fleeting. It soon gave way to a blur of bright light. Tactile sensation returned, and as Hazergal made the laborious ascent to consciousness, one word, buzzing hideously in the intruder's flat drone, lingered.

"Awake."

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"Is it dead?" Hedrenatherax rumbled, trying to peer over Gemnez's looming bulk.

The huge devil was crouched toad-like over the prostrate from of the babau, the folds of his massive belly almost obscuring the smaller demon from sight. "No, he lives. It appears your crude methods have not done any permanent damage... at least physically."

The two fiends stood within a square room, featureless beyond a single iron door. It was a prison cell, although there were no manacles, nor even the barest of creature comforts for those unlucky enough to be interred there. The room occupied one of the many lower levels of Gemnez's keep, and this particular cell was housed in a wing that had not seen use in centuries.

Gemnez stood, his elephantine legs thrusting his girth up with surprising ease. The devil stared down at the limp form of his "guest" and stroked the warty surface of his chin thoughtfully. "Hedrenatherax," he called over his shoulder. "You have done well, but I wish to be alone with our new arrival. You may go."

The balor opened his fanged mouth to protest, then closed it with an audible snap. Twice he had been humiliated for defying Gemnez, and he had no desire to be on the receiving end of the obese devil's ire again. Acquiescing for the moment, Hedrenatherax bowed his head and left the room.

"He has gone," Gemnez said softly. "You can stop pretending."

Hazergal opened his eyes, and stared up at the colossal from of Gemnez. He had been awake for nearly an hour, but knowing nothing of his captor's intent, had feigned unconsciousness.

Gemnez backed away from his captive, and settled his bulk at the other end of the cell near the door. "Well now, I am very pleased that the great buffoon Hedrenatherax has not damaged you irreparably." The great devil placed his flabby hands on his hips and smiled a terrible, red-lipped smile.

Hazergal pushed himself up from the floor, and sat with his back against the closest wall. "Where am I?" he croaked, his voice dry and cracked from disuse.

"You, my friend, currently reside within the great fortress of Gemnez Drak. You have visited here once before, but your ignorance is understandable. Much has changed since last we met." Gemnez's tone was

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soft, even friendly.

"The spawning pit," Hazergal said simply, his mind replaying the horrid details of his initial transformation. "What do you want with me?"

Gemnez clucked his tongue like a scolding parent in response to Hazergal's question. "Now, now. Let us not forget our manners, we have both not had the benefit of a proper introduction."

"An introduction…" Hazergal's jaw fell open at the devil's absurd demeanor.

"Yes, an introduction. I will go first." Gemnez cleared his throat dramatically. "I am Gemnez, rogue devil, loyal servant of our great lord Pyrak, and master of Gemnez Drak." The huge fiend smiled broadly after finishing his introduction and extended one flabby claw, inviting Hazergal to follow suit.

Hazergal stared blankly at his bizarre captor, fumbling for words that would not come. At last he managed to dredge up the one piece of information revealed to him by the strange intruder in his dream. "My name is…or was…Hazergal."

"Ahh, Hazergal. A noble name if ever I heard one," Gemnez purred. "This was your name when you were mortal, yes?"

"Yes, when I was mortal…"

Images flashed before Hazergal's eyes. The sound of his name spoken aloud brought forth visions of unremembered places and people. He saw the throne room he had visited in his mind, complete with the bearded figure seated upon the polished onyx. A score of other figures stood at attention before the throne, tall bestial creatures Hazergal recognized as gnolls. Each was armed and armored in a similar fashion, as if they belonged to some kind of military unit.

Among these looming shapes a smaller figure moved, gliding between the towering gnolls with an air of authority. He wore a gleaming shirt of fine metal links and was armed with a straight-bladed sword, slung over his back on a baldric. As he moved through the ranks of gnolls, Hazergal saw his face. Rage and dread filled him as recognition pierced the veil of his amnesia, forcing his lips to spit forth the name of his nemesis. "Azadan."

"What was that?" Gemnez asked.

"Azadan," Hazergal said again. "Someone I remembered…from when I was mortal." The memory he had experienced was already fading.

"A friend? A lover?" Gemnez gauged Hazergal's reaction to each

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of these queries, but the answer was plainly written on the babau's face. "*An enemy*," Gemnez hissed with pleasure. "Yes it would be. Those that have wronged us seem to stand larger in our minds. Wouldn't you agree?"

Hazergal ignored the huge fiend's question and stood. He glanced around at the spartan emptiness of his surroundings and realized that he was not afraid. Oddly, Gemnez put him at ease. He had no reason to trust the Infernal, but something about the devil's demeanor assuaged his fear, at least for the moment.

"You have nothing to fear from me, Hazergal," Gemnez said, as if he had read babau's mind. "While you are my guest, no harm shall come to you. I give you my word on that."

The sincerity in the devil's voice seemed out of place coming from such a diabolical creature, but Hazergal found himself believing Gemnez. "Very well, I accept your oath, but I must know what is it you want of me."

"A fair question, and one that I do not currently have an answer for," Gemnez said. "For now I wish only to speak with you, perhaps even help you remember more of your past."

"Hah!" Hazergal snorted. "You are quite the altruistic fiend."

Gemnez grinned broadly. "Well, yes. As devils go, I suppose I am. But fear not, I have my reasons and motivations for providing you with sanctuary."

"Yes, I suppose you do," Hazergal said flatly. "There is…"

Hazergal was cut off as the door to his cell crashed open to reveal the looming bulk of Hedrenatherax. The balor was smiling, something Hazergal had not thought possible of the vicious fiend.

Gemnez, who had leapt nimbly away from the door, fixed his most menacing glare upon the intruding demon. "I thought I told you I wanted to be alone with my guest," he spat.

"A thousand pardons, oh bloated one," Hedrenatherax shot back. Some of the old familiar defiance had crept back into the balor's tone. "I have news I guarantee you need to know."

Hazergal watched Hedrenatherax closely, realizing that the huge demon was literally shaking with excitement. The former archmage surmised that anything which made Hedrenatherax that happy was bound to spell doom and destruction for someone else.

Hazergal felt the shifting of something momentous in the air. The whole cell was alive with a fell energy, and the balor in the doorway was

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most certainly the bearer of ill tidings.

"Very well, what news do you have that is so important?" Gemnez asked. His heavy reptilian brows were creased with anticipation, as if he too sensed the impending weight of destiny.

Hedrenatherax's smile widened and his words leaked through his jagged teeth like a foul vapor. "Pyrak is dying."

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Pain hung like a red haze over the throne room of Pyrak's floating citadel. The demon lord sat slumped in his throne, cradling his great sword, and fighting the agony-induced delirium that threatened to overtake him. His left arm hung useless and numb at his side, the open wound in his shoulder disabling the limb completely. A foul stench arose from the demon lord's motionless form, a miasma of rot and decay that served as an ever-present reminder that death lingered close.

Pyrak sensed his impending doom, felt its brutal caress with each labored breath, each excruciating throb from the wound in his shoulder. He lamented only the idleness of his end. The pace of his demise was a slow and torturous fading, not the instantaneous destruction gifted to those who fell in combat.

Fiendbleeder had been conspicuously silent after the battle with Beyemon, perhaps satisfied for the moment with the archdevil's destruction. Pyrak knew that he had lived this long only through his contact with the sword. It was sustaining him for some unknown reason, prolonging his life, and his agony, with whatever fell magic it possessed.

The silence of *Fiendbleeder* had left Pyrak's mind completely his own, but this was no boon. It took every ounce of his will to stifle screaming with each radiating burst of pain. He would have welcomed *Fiendbleeder's* intrusion, if only to focus his mind on something beyond agony.

Pyrak wondered if *Dreadskewer*, the great spear that had inflicted his mortal wound, had left Beyemon's mind in his final moments, leaving him to experience his own death fully. *Dreadskewer,* like *Fiendbleeder,* likely possessed a dark and driven personality all its own, he thought. If it did, then it had undoubtedly laid claim to the archdevil that had so recently wielded it. The spear had been recovered from the battlefield by one of Pyrak's vrocks. It lay at the foot of his throne, the demon lord's black blood still staining its lusterless iron point.

"My lord?" A voice suddenly cut through the haze of Pyrak's pain and despair. "I have brought a poultice for your wound."

Raising his head, Pyrak tried in vain to focus his eyes on the figure that

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stood at the foot of his throne. It advanced cautiously, holding an object before it. Pyrak half hoped it was one of his generals come to finally end his misery.

The scent of cinnamon mingled with blood filled his nostrils, and Pyrak finally recognized the six-armed figure of his marilith general, Heskera.

"Leave me," Pyrak whispered, his mouth filled with the acrid taste of his own decay.

"This will ease your pain, my lord." Heskera held out the poultice she had made. "Let me apply it to your wound."

In truth, Pyrak doubted he would have the strength to stop the marilith if she truly wished to disobey him. But *Fiendbleeder,* always *Fiendbleeder,* ensured that his rule would last for a little while longer.

Let her, the sword said, stifling any resistance Pyrak may have had.

Pyrak nodded, barely finding the strength to raise his head. Heskera advanced at her lord's acquiescence and Pyrak felt the cool touch of her six slender hands upon his body. There was a momentary bolt of pain as the marilith packed the putrefying wound with whatever healing concoction she had managed to put together. Then the pain receded, and Pyrak felt a minute—but noticeable—lift in his strength and spirit.

"Why?" He croaked as Heskera finished her careful ministrations. Pyrak's wound had been remarkably resistant to any from of magical healing; he wondered how the poultice Heskera had applied worked when the mightiest of curative spells had not.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Why do you help me?" Pyrak said with effort, struggling to keep his head from sinking onto his chest.

"You are my liege. It is my duty to serve you," Heskera said, searching Pyrak's eyes, puzzled.

"You sound like an Infernal," Pyrak chuckled weakly, enjoying the rage that darkened Heskera's features at his insult. "Here I sit before you, weak as a babe, your opportunity to take my place growing closer with every breath, and you do nothing. Why?"

Heskera folded her six arms across her chest, her eyes deep in thought. When she finally spoke, the lie she concocted rolled off her tongue in a silken purr. It was convincing, but not enough to fool Pyrak. "You have won a great victory for the Abyss. There is more honor in serving you than in destroying you. I wish only to remain at your side after you recover and

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lead the Abyss to greater glory."

She lies, whispered *Fiendbleeder*.

Pyrak ignored *Fiendbleeder's* obvious assessment .The lie she had wrought held truth within it, the demon lord saw. Heskera needed Pyrak to live to hold onto the tenuous power that she now maintained. There was little doubt that the idea of simply slaying Pyrak and usurping his place had crossed her mind, but she knew that she could never hold the throne. She had far too many enemies to rule for long. On the other hand, at Pyrak's side, as a trusted general, she enjoyed prestige and a modicum of safety afforded by Pyrak's own personal power and reputation. Alone, she would certainly fall victim to more powerful demons. So, true to her demonic nature, Heskera had found and chosen the best possible way to stay alive *and* hold onto her position.

"You are truly a faithful servant, Heskera," Pyrak said, making no attempt to hide the biting sarcasm in his voice. "Now leave me."

"My lord, I cannot leave you now, you are too weak," Heskera whispered, pulling close, urgency in her voice. "Hedrenatherax is on his way here."

Pyrak's grip on *Fiendbleeder* tightened. He felt the ominous implications of Heskera's words, and a spark of rage flared within his battered body.

"He will try to kill you if you are alone," the marilith said simply. "He might reconsider if I am here."

Heskera was a skilled sorcerer, but Pyrak doubted that she would be a match for the brute strength and savage ferocity of Hedrenatherax. In his weakened state, he knew that the balor would slay him easily, regardless of *Fiendbleeder* or Heskera.

"Does he come alone?" Pyrak asked, his eyes smoldering.

"No, Gemnez is with him." Heskera sounded almost hopeful at the mention of the rogue devil's name.

That was odd, it was well known that Gemnez despised Hedrenatherax. What could the two of them be doing together? .

"Go and find Grimclaw and bring him here," Pyrak ordered. "Make sure he comes alone."

Grimclaw, the leader of his Dreadwings, was the only demon that Pyrak would even consider trusting. It was Grimclaw who had dragged Pyrak from the battlefield, while the stunned army of devils watched their leader bleed his life away onto the scorched earth of Avernus. The big vrock was that rarest of demons: one who understood and valued loyalty.

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Heskera opened her mouth to protest, but the fire had returned to Pyrak's eyes, and mortally wounded or not, his tone brooked no refusal. The marilith turned and slithered from the throne room in silence to do her master's bidding.

Well sword, can you sustain me for a bit longer? Pyrak asked *Fiendbleeder* when Heskera had left the room.

The poison is strong. Can you not feel it? the sword droned, ignoring Pyrak's question. *Your death is at hand, demon. And who shall wield me when you are gone?*

I care not, but Hedrenatherax must not rule. Surely you see this, Pyrak said.

Hedrenatherax is a powerful demon; I could do well in his possession. His mind is weak, but his body is very strong. He could not defy me as you do.

Pyrak's rebuttal was instantaneous. *They will not follow him, your crusade will come to an end, and you shall spend your existence in the hands of a mindless automaton*. He spoke the truth, Hedrenatherax was physically powerful, although not so powerful as Pyrak himself, but he had no foresight. His savage demeanor would win him few allies.

Perhaps you are right demon. There may be another suitable candidate. These ominous words gave Pyrak pause. The sword was dangling some vital piece of information in front of him, but he knew it would not elaborate.

What other? The Abyss was filled with mighty demons, but none had ever enjoyed the kind of success in the war against the Hells that Pyrak had. In countless millennia, not one of the nine rulers of Infernium had fallen to a demon lord, only Pyrak could claim that honor, however costly the price. If *Fiendbleeder* had chosen a new thrall, Pyrak had no idea who it might be.

Then you will aid me? Pyrak pressed.

Yes, when the time comes, I will aid you, said *Fiendbleeder* at last, exasperation evident in its tone.

Pyrak felt *Fiendbleeder* recede from his mind, and he savored both the silence of the empty hall and the silence within his mind. One last moment of quiet before the weight of his destiny came crashing down. He glanced down at *Dreadskewer,* and wondered if the spear was merely speeding along an inevitable course of events that was beyond his power to control.

He had held power for millennia, but no demon lord, no matter how powerful, could permanently stem the tide of chaos. It assailed them

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constantly. Eventually, a demon stronger than he would take his place. Pyrak had accepted this long ago; it was simply the price of power.

In truth, he did not fear death. It held release form the prison his life had become, a prison that *Fiendbleeder* ever held shut—a prison he desperately wanted to escape.

Pyrak had only one desire in these hours he knew to be his last. If he were to die today, then Hedrenatherax would accompany him into that final darkness. The balor had been a fine servant, but his brutish tactics and lack of intellect would destroy all that Pyrak had created. *Fiendbleeder* would dominate Hedrenatherax completely, and force him into conflicts with the Infernals that were beyond his power or resources. Everything Pyrak had built would crumble, and above all, the demon lord wanted his legacy to remain, even if he could not.

Pyrak ran one taloned hand down the length of *Fiendbleeder's* blade, lingering along its silver edge. "Once more sword, you shall taste the blood of demons by my hand. Once more and then you shall release me."

He said the words aloud, into the stillness of his empty hall, but *Fiendbleeder* made no reply. And so, the demon lord closed his eyes, quietly awaiting his destiny.

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The Plains of Vrack, long the domain of the demon lord Pyrak, stretched away in all directions, an infinite expanse of nothing. Flat, barren, and windswept, the plains were as inhospitable as any layer of the Abyss, layered in trackless dust that had not stirred in eons. Most activity in this domain was in the skies, and it teemed with all manner of flying monstrosities. Winged demons and other horrors, such as gargoyles and harpies, cavorted in the green Abyssal sky, as all things evil and airborne found respite above the domain of Pyrak.

The most prominent structure in all this emptiness was Pyrak's own floating citadel. Once belonging to the deposed demon lord Pazuzu, the marvelous structure of mithral and ivory was now the center of Pyrak's power. Below it, a bizarre and motley collection of ramshackle buildings had been hastily constructed. Here, Pyrak's ground forces dwelled. It was one of the few bastions of land dwelling creatures in a world of flying terror.

Today the skies about Pyrak's citadel, normally swarming with his minions, were empty save for one demon: Grimclaw, the leader of Pyrak's Dreadwings. The big vrock hovered patiently, his long talons gripping a two-handed morningstar of sky-blue steel. The weapon, a gift from his liege, was Grimclaw's symbol of authority over the Dreadwings. But neither he nor any symbol he possessed was enough to persuade the nearly two thousand elite vrocks to rally around the stricken Pyrak. So here he waited, alone, ready to stand against the one who would come to usurp his master's power.

Grimclaw had tried in vain to convince his brethren to aid their master in this coming struggle. But vrocks, like all demons, have no concept of honor or loyalty, giving their fickle allegiances to the strongest demon. To the Dreadwings, Pyrak's weakness was merely an indication that a new leader must arise, and if Hedrenatherax could claim the throne, then so be it. Such was the way of the Abyss.

But Grimclaw had longed served Pyrak. He had come to understand the rarity of the demon lord nature, and the scope of his vision. Through their close association, Grimclaw had found that Pyrak's anomalous behavior had nurtured change within in his own soul. He had come to see

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the benefits of loyalty, unity, and structure. He had also gained respect and admiration for the one under which he served.

And through these changes, he had come to see that he was no longer bound by his heritage. Grimclaw's lament was that he was alone in his enlightenment. Only he could share the vision that his master had labored so long to create, a vision that had been so close to fulfillment as Beyemon lay bleeding on the battle field of Avernus; a vision that now rested on the brink of annihilation.

If Hedrenatherax slew Pyrak, all that had been achieved would be destroyed. Shortsighted and oafish, the balor would unravel the intricately woven skein of command that held Pyrak's armies together. Leaderless, the armies would disband. Hedrenatherax would be little more than one of thousands of petty demonic rulers, waging pointless battles against his neighbors and reveling in his own ponderous futility.

The vrock shuddered at the thought. He would much rather be dead than live beneath the rule of one such as Hedrenatherax. Grimclaw knew his vigil was ultimately pointless, and that he stood little chance of defeating the balor in combat. He hoped only to slow Hedrenatherax down, giving Pyrak more time to prepare. Perhaps he would catch the overconfident balor off guard and wound him. If he could weaken Hedrenatherax, even a fraction, it might be enough to ensure Pyrak's victory.

The foul smell of brimstone suddenly invaded Grimclaw's highly tuned senses, and he caught sight of a brilliant flash of virulent green flame low on the horizon.

Hedrenatherax had arrived.

Grimclaw watched as the balor came into view, noting that he was not alone. There were three other large, winged shapes speeding along with the big demon. One he recognized as the bloated form of the rogue horned devil, Gemnez. The remaining two figures drew a curse from Grimclaw, for Hedrenatherax had come prepared. Two massive azodaemons, fiendish mercenaries from the plane of Gehenna, flew alongside the balor, and were obviously under his command.

Only seconds remained before Hedrenatherax and his hired swords arrived. Grimclaw quickly mouthed the words to a number of protection spells in an attempt to bolster his meager defenses. He took his morningstar in a firm grip, and waited—the only selfless demon in the entire Abyss, awaiting his chance to die for his master.

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As he streaked over the barren plains, Hedrenatherax caught sight of Grimclaw. He knew he would encounter resistance in his bid for power, but he had expected a more formidable barrier than a single vrock. It mattered little. If accounts were accurate, he merely had to reach Pyrak to slay him.

The mighty demon lord had been mortally wounded in his battle with Beyemon, and rumors persisted that he could barely stand without assistance. If this was true, Hedrenatherax had only to pluck the throne from Pyrak's grasp, something he felt was quite possible with but a single stroke from his sword.

When word of this golden opportunity had reached his ears, Hedrenatherax had been in Gemnez Drak, serving the spawning pit's master. The bloated horned devil was engrossed in the strange demon that remembered his mortal life. Hedrenatherax had no interest in this planar anomaly, other than watching it die slowly on the end of his blade. But Gemnez had wanted it alive, and Hedrenatherax had bowed to the devil's power and reluctantly retrieved the creature.

Although unsubtle in the extreme, Hedrenatherax had long ago planted a single spy in the citadel. Having been in the balor's employ for centuries, this agent had never reported a single thing, until today. The spy's sole purpose was to inform him if Pyrak ever returned weakened or incapacitated from his many excursions into Avernus. Hedrenatherax was certain that he could not defeat Pyrak if the demon lord was at his full strength. But he had concluded long ago that Pyrak's forays into the Hells would eventually lead to either his destruction, or a severe loss of power. Either would allow an enterprising demon in the know to usurp his position. And it had happened in a way that was so undeniably perfect that Hedrenatherax could scarcely believe his luck.

There was but one obstacle that was beyond Hedrenatherax's control, the rogue devil Gemnez. Although exiled from his home plane, Gemnez showed the unswerving loyalty common to his race, a loyalty that might induce him to stand against Hedrenatherax. But fate had again deigned to intercede on the balor's behalf. The Infernal had given his word that he would not hinder Hedrenatherax in any way.

As strange as this was, Hedrenatherax thought he understood the

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Devil's decision. The Abyss was governed by the fundamental principle of rule by the strongest. No demon could hold onto sovereignty without immense reserves of personal power, and once that power was in question, another demon would rise to claim his place. For untold millennia demon lords had arisen and been deposed by their underlings, it was simply a cold truth that every demonic ruler would eventually face.

Oddly enough, Gemnez had chosen to accompany Hedrenatherax to Pyrak's citadel. He had been strangely calm when told of Pyrak's slow demise. The pride and arrogance that Hedrenatherax found so enraging in the rogue devil had vanished, leaving an even more aggravating stoicism.

Hedrenatherax had been ready for a confrontation, for if he could not defeat Gemnez, he would never hold onto power, regardless of whether he slew Pyrak or not. He had even recruited a pair of azodaemon mercenaries to provide assistance, should Gemnez prove intractable. But there was no fight in the rogue devil. Gemnez had merely nodded and asked if he might bear witness firsthand to Hedrenatherax's ascension. Flabbergasted, and caught completely off guard, he had acquiesced.

So, his ambitions finally within his grasp, Hedrenatherax had set forth from Gemnez Drak, accompanied by a devil and the two azodaemons, to claim his destiny. But now that his goal was on the horizon, a new dilemma gnawed at him.

The sight of this single vrock—whom the balor recognized as Grimclaw, the leader of Pyrak's Dreadwings—spawned a raw edge of uneasiness in him. The strangeness of Grimclaw hovering there, in what had to be the most brazen act of stupidity Hedrenatherax had ever witnessed, puzzled him deeply.

Never had Hedrenatherax seen a demon lord's minion rally to his side once his power was on the decline. There were always dozens of would-be usurpers ready to strike down their Abyssal liege at any sign of weakness. But now, Pyrak sat weak as a babe and this lone vrock chose to defend him. It was a futile gesture, one that the balor would never understand.

Why? Hedrenatherax thought. Why would Grimclaw put his own life in jeopardy for such a ludicrous thing? There was nothing to be gained here, no power to be earned. What might prompt such a reckless course of action?

It was true that, in Hedrenatherax's years of service as the demon lord's major domo, he had seen inexplicable behavior exhibited by Pyrak's minions. Many servants had displayed something the devils called "loyalty," a concept

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the balor could scarcely imagine, let alone understand. In exchange for this enigmatic allegiance, the demon lord had afforded his minions a level of trust that was unheard of in the Abyss. As baffling as these acts were to Hedrenatherax, they seemed to be at the core of Pyrak's success. In his many years as the ruler of Vrack, the demon lord had never dealt with the endless assassination attempts that plagued every other Abyssal ruler. But could this notion of loyalty have driven Grimclaw to such a suicidal course?

Of all the demons touched by this strange philosophy, none seemed to have embraced it as totally as Grimclaw. In some ways, Hedrenatherax had always known that he would cross blades with the big vrock before the day was done. But not like this.

Certainly, he had no fear of Grimclaw. Though formidable, he was an inferior breed of demon, and could not match Hedrenatherax's physical might. But still, the vrock's lone vigil unnerved him. As he drew closer to Pyrak's citadel, he drew his great jagged blade from his belt and made ready to end the source of his discomfort.

Hedrenatherax paused in mid-air roughly fifty yards from Grimclaw, who hovered unfazed, morningstar at the ready. The two azodaemons hovered as well, regarding the lone vrock with grim amusement, awaiting the order to attack. Gemnez hung back even further, his massive body held airborne by his two stubby wings, a spectacle as ridiculous as it was aerodynamically absurd.

"Grimclaw!" Hedrenatherax boomed. "Why do you throw you life away so foolishly? Pyrak will die regardless of this bravado."

"Perhaps you are right, balor," Grimclaw called back, his huge feathered wings lashing the air about him. "And perhaps Pyrak will split open that great empty melon that sits upon your neck, and rid the Abyss of your odiferous presence."

One of the azodaemons chuckled under his breath at Grimclaw's insult, while Gemnez guffawed unabashedly, his high girlish laughter echoing in the thin Abyssal air.

Hedrenatherax grinned, revealing the double row of shark-like teeth that filled his cavernous mouth. "This is unfortunate Grimclaw, I would have valued your service," the balor said, drifting forward, beginning to close the gap between he and the vrock leader. "But it is obvious that whatever poison that has been addling Pyrak's mind all these years has spread to many of his servants."

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Grimclaw grimaced and spat, as if Hedrenatherax words had fouled the air. "You are a lumbering oaf, balor. You have never been unable to grasp anything beyond your own immediate desires. You may slay me, you may even slay Pyrak, but your legacy shall fade like a scream in a windstorm, and you will ever be seen as Pyrak's inferior."

Rage spewed, hot and acrid, into Hedrenatherax's mind. The vrock's words carried the weight of truth, cutting him as no blade ever could. Hedrenatherax had heard enough; there would be no more words. He could not defeat Grimclaw in this manner. But he could crush the life from the vrock and bathe in his blood, even though it would not assuage the self-doubt that the Dreadwing leader had planted within him.

"He is mine! Do not interfere!" Hedrenatherax growled over his shoulder to the two azodaemons that had accompanied him. He then flared his wings and shot forward howling, sword and body blazing with malevolent flame.

The vrock allowed the balor to get within a few feet of him. Then he spun lithely away from Hedrenatherax, his wings making barely a flutter, so precise was his aerial maneuvering. Hedrenatherax was not a clumsy flyer, but could not match Grimclaw's grace in the air. He sped past the vrock, his sword flashing through the empty space where the vulture-demon had been. Grimclaw did not wait for Hedrenatherax to regain his equilibrium. With a powerful stroke of his wings, he sped after the balor.

Having managed to slow and turn to face his adversary, Hedrenatherax was still not prepared for Grimclaw's lighting follow up to his ill-planned charge. The vrock had aimed his body so that it would pass only a few feet above the balor's head. As he arrowed past, his heavy morningstar lashed out, smashing its spiked head full into Hedrenatherax's stunned face.

Blood and flame erupted from the impact of Grimclaw's weapon, and Hedrenatherax was flung head over heels from the force of the blow, his wings tangling around his body. Stunned, Hedrenatherax began to fall, plummeting towards the Abyssal plain thousands of feet below.

Grimclaw's morningstar had crushed many of the bones in Hedrenatherax's face, as well as smashing most of his teeth. The vrock knew that this was merely an inconvenience to the great demon, and that his flesh was already healing. Knowing that he had gotten lucky with his initial attack, Grimclaw pressed his advantage and dove after the falling balor, cautiously hoping that victory may not be beyond his grasp.

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Hedrenatherax wrapped his wings tightly around his body as he fell, hiding within a cocoon of leathery skin. He made no attempt to slow his fall, and the ground was rushing up to meet him at an alarming rate.

Grimclaw, noting his enemy's inaction, surmised that the wound his morningstar had inflicted was far more serious than he'd thought. The big vrock knifed towards his target, almost completely vertical. With his wings tucked, Grimclaw would near maximum velocity when he reached Hedrenatherax. His held his morningstar, still stained with the balor's blood, ready to deliver every ounce of kinetic energy he could muster.

From above Gemnez and the azodaemons watched as Grimclaw reached his target and loosed a screech of triumph. Neither they nor Grimclaw could have divined what would happen next, as Hedrenatherax suddenly spread his great wings, his body flames flaring as bright as a midday sun.

The intense glare caused Grimclaw to falter, and his weapon uncoiled a fraction of a second slower than he had planned. This slight hesitation allowed Hedrenatherax to dart out one taloned claw and catch the morningstar by its long steel shaft, stopping it cold before it could impact with his skull. Then, with a savage yank, Hedrenatherax pulled the weapon and its wielder into a fiery embrace, folding his wings around Grimclaw in an inescapable mesh of skin.

Tangled together, the two demons fell. Grimclaw struggled mightily, but he could not break the iron grasp of Hedrenatherax. He could only wait for the inevitable impact with the ground. Like a descending meteor, the two struggling demons met the earth with a resonating thud, smashing into the dusty Abyssal plane in an eruption of flame and dirt.

As the dust settled, it was clear who had taken the brunt of the fall. Grimclaw lay crumpled, sprawled like a broken doll, his wings and limbs shattered, while Hedrenatherax, far more robust, was already climbing shakily to his feet.

The balor had not survived the fall unscathed, and his body showed obvious signs of physical duress. One wing hung useless and tattered. His left arm had been broken in over a dozen places and dangled limply from his shoulder. In addition, Hedrenatherax's face had not fully recovered from the brutal caress of Grimclaw's morningstar, and it still caved in grotesquely on one side. But despite the grievous wounds, the balor was casting about for his sword, which had been knocked loose on his impact

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with the ground. He spied the blade not more than a few feet from Grimclaw's inert body.

Dragging his broken wing, Hedrenatherax moved to retrieve his sword, his body emitting sickening grinding and popping noises, as his broken bones straightened and knitted themselves whole again. By the time he stooped to pick up his great jagged edged sword, his wing and arm were completely healed.

With one heavy spike-toed foot, Hedrenatherax rolled Grimclaw onto his back. The vrock still lived, although he was a mangled wreck of shattered bone and congealing gore. Incredibly, Grimclaw was trying to speak, his breath echoing through his open beak in a barely audible rattle. Curious, Hedrenatherax leaned down to hear his foe's final words.

"Forgive…" the vrock wheezed, his eyes hazed and distant. "Forgive me, my lord. I have failed you." The anguish in those words stunned Hedrenatherax with their potency, although he felt no remorse, only the casual regret one might have for losing a useful object.

"Such a waste," Hedrenatherax muttered and lifted his sword over his head. The blade flashed down once, and then once more. The remarkable fiend had fallen, a victim of his own sense of loyalty.

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"Grimclaw is dead, my lord," Heskera whispered, her mouth close to her grim liege's head.

Pyrak sat motionless as the news was delivered, but a jolt of remorse went through him. There was a momentary pang of regret at the loss of such a faithful servant. "Did he injure Hedrenatherax?"

"No, not seriously." The marilith's fear was showing in her voice, the frayed edge of desperation leaking through, for if Pyrak died, she would soon follow. "You must prepare yourself, my lord."

Pyrak had not moved from his throne in hours. The huge gash in his shoulder was a spreading lake of ichor. It lashed his body with torment at every movement, however minute. But he knew he had to move. At any moment, Hedrenatherax would come through the doors of his throne room, red with rage and murder, to destroy all that he had worked for. If his empire were to sink into ruin, he would not meet its end feeble and broken.

"Help me, Heskera," Pyrak commanded, beckoning the marilith closer. "Bolster my strength with your magic."

The marilith slithered close to the throne, and her voice rang out in the broken syllables of magical incantation. The demoness' hand momentarily glowed with greenish fire as she completed her spell, and then the witch flame leapt from her outstretched hands to bathe Pyrak in fiendish radiance. The demon lord seemed to take strength from the flames, drawing them into his body with a single mighty breath. The wound in his shoulder remained unchanged, but the drab lifeless appearance of his steel gray feathers brightened somewhat, and for the first time in many hours, Pyrak found the strength to stand.

"Better?" Heskera asked, a hesitant smile upon her delicate features.

"Yes," Pyrak responded. "How long will this last?."

"A few hours at most. It should sustain you until you can defeat Hedrenatherax," the marilith said, false optimism staining her words.

Pyrak turned to where *Fiendbleeder* lay propped up against his throne. He knew the sword would add its own peculiar strength to the magic Heskera had provided, but he doubted even that would be enough.

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Perhaps he will kill you quickly, offered *Fiendbleeder* with mock sympathy. The sword's ambivalence was infuriating. It stood to lose as much as Pyrak, should he fall to Hedrenatherax.

If he does, I hope that fool of a balor has enough sense to snap you over his knee before assuming the throne, Pyrak shot back.

Despite his loathing for *Fiendbleeder,* Pyrak picked up the sword and held it almost reverently. It was the key to all he had accumulated, yet the very center of his misery.

Pyrak stepped from the dais that supported his throne and stood silently, his back to the seat of power he had occupied for millennia. The demon lord gazed down the length of the grand hall that held his throne. His flat black eyes fastened upon the looming set of double doors that that would soon admit the harbinger of his destruction.

Heskera stood close by, continuing to use her magic to protect her liege. Her light touch upon Pyrak's body every few moments imparted vast reservoirs of magical strength and arcane protection. When Heskera had finished with Pyrak, she turned her magic on herself, boosting her own abilities.

Pyrak began to swing *Fiendbleeder* about, using only his left hand to wield the great sword. Even without the use of his right arm, the agony this movement awoke within the demon lord's wound made him sick with pain. But he persisted, hoping in vain to drive the agony from his body with physical exertion. *Fiendbleeder* was never meant to be wielded one-handed, and Pyrak's strokes were clumsy and off balance as he struggled with the cumbersome weight of the weapon.

Wearied after only a few moments, Pyrak ceased his exercises with *Fiendbleeder* and dropped the heavy point of the sword to the ground. Even with the magic that now flooded his body, Pyrak knew he was at half strength at best. *Dreadskewer* had done its work far too well. Even now, the devilish spear siphoned off his strength in great, grasping draughts.

Pyrak leaned upon *Fiendbleeder*, his breath laboring from his gaping beak in great wheezing gasps, and wondered, how had it come to this? After all he had done for the Abyss—the building of his army and empire, the slaying of an archdevil—he was left alone to face his fate. Only one of his servants dared stand with him, and she did so only out of desire to protect herself from the doom that would surely follow Hedrenatherax's ascension.

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The demon lord had often pondered his place in the great cycle of the Abyss. He had accomplished much, but it would soon be dashed to ruin by a vain fool's belligerent avarice. The Abyss had operated in this way from the beginning of time, a ruthless simplicity of design.

It was the most glaring flaw that existed in his race. Any sustained order was impossible, there were too many hungry demons lusting for the power of others. There were too many deceitful servants and disloyal minions for a ruler to accomplish anything beyond defeating the machinations of his own household. The fact that he, Pyrak, had accomplished so much was as much a mystery to him as it was to the other rulers in the Abyss.

Other demon lords—Pazuzu, Orcus, Demogorgon—had existed long before Pyrak had come to power, and each had accomplished only a fraction of what he had done in the last thousand years. But it mattered little. His name would be scoured from the Abyss. Just another demon lord deposed, another casualty of a plane that knew nothing beyond its own self-destruction.

Self-pity does not become you, demon, the sword *Fiendbleeder* whispered suddenly, filling Pyrak's head with its shadow. *Why have you allowed this to happen? You have known for years that Hedrenatherax would seek to depose you. Why did you not slay him?*

He had his uses; I did not wish to waste a useful servant, Pyrak answered.

Your frugality may be your undoing, came the terse reply. *I suggest you ready yourself. He is here.*

Fiendbleeder's announcement was immediately followed by the fierce pounding of something huge and heavy against the twin mithral doors of the throne room. Pyrak had had them sealed, an iron bar running through the ornate handle-rings of each door. The paltry defense would do little to keep his enemies at bay, and Pyrak strode forward to meet his adversary. As he moved, he fought the urge to scream, each step bringing renewed agony in his wounded shoulder.

The metal crossbar holding the throne room doors closed bent, then snapped with an echoing metallic shriek, as Hedrenatherax hurled his body against the last remaining barrier between him and his prize. The doors were flung wide and the balor came charging through, his momentum carrying him a dozen paces into the throne room.

Hedrenatherax halted immediately, glaring down the twenty or so yards that separated him from Pyrak. The balor's wide fanged mouth split

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in a triumphant sneer as he saw the state that Pyrak was in. The great demon swaggered forward, his jagged sword dangling casually from his right hand.

Heskera had slithered up beside her lord during the usurper's clamorous entrance, drawing all six of her swords. The marilith's full red lips were set in a hard line, her eyes clouded with the gathering storm of rage. The malignancy of her gaze alone would certainly have slain a lesser demon.

"Pyrak, my lord. You do not look well at all," Hedrenatherax said coolly. "In fact, you look like you are about to fall down and die."

"You have ever been a great lumbering fool, Hedrenatherax," Pyrak spat in reply. "Spare me your pathetic attempts at mockery and come forward. I would end this charade *now*."

Hedrenatherax was undeterred by Pyrak's reply, and cast a glance over his shoulder to signal the rest of his party to enter. "Please, come in, my friends. I want you all to witness this."

The two azodaemon mercenaries crept cautiously into the throne room, followed by the huge ponderous form of Gemnez. The devil's face was a mix of anxiousness and curiosity, and he stood well back from Hedrenatherax and the azodaemons.

The sight of Gemnez brought a hiss of disgust from Pyrak. "Oh Gemnez, please do not tell me you have cast your lot with this brainless cur."

Eyes downcast, Gemnez shuffled forward, as if he were ashamed to meet Pyrak's baleful glare. "My lord, I owe you much. You have offered me sanctuary these many years, and for that I am grateful. But I cannot stem the tide of change, and I must persevere, even if you cannot." The devil's words were heavy with regret, his grudging acceptance of an obviously distasteful state of affairs.

"You see, Pyrak, even the wisest of your servants has deemed you unfit," Hedrenatherax said, still grinning. "Now if you will kneel before me, and show your neck, I will make this as quick and painless as possible." This brought a hissing chuckle from the bat-like azodaemons. The balor grinned all the wider to see that his audience was well pleased.

"I see you have not the courage to face me alone," Pyrak said, gesturing to the two winged fiends. "Will you attack me *en masse*, or shall they wait until I've cut you to pieces to intervene?"

"No, no, nothing like that. They are merely here to witness to my triumph, as my faithful servants."

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"Faithful!?" Pyrak boomed. "Do you really think any daemon, especially ones as conniving as azodaemons, are faithful? Does your stupidity know no limits, Hedrenatherax?"

Ignoring Pyrak's biting words, Hedrenatherax took notice of Heskera for the first time, smiling broadly at the demoness. "Ahh, Heskera. Standing with your master until the end, how noble, how…devilish of you."

The marilith's eyes smoldered crimson at the insult, and her body tensed with the desire to surge forward and cut the mocking grin from Hedrenatherax's face with her blades. Instead she utilized a far more potent weapon. "Such a fool, Hedrenatherax," she said. "Do you know, that no matter what happens here today, whether you slay Pyrak or not, you will ever be seen as inferior?"

"I think not…"

"No?!" Heskera cut the balor off, her shrill voice stinging the air with its vehemence. "Listen to me you mindless *dretch*! You have come here, in our lord's weakest hour, to challenge him for the throne. All the Abyss knows that you would not even entertain such a notion, were it otherwise."

The smile evaporated from Hedrenatherax's face, and the bravado in his posture faded. "Close your mouth, bitch, lest I close it for you," the balor rumbled.

The marilith ignored the threat, her body quivering with wrath. "It is true. You will always be a pretender no matter what may occur here today," she continued. Her voice was softer now, but it dripped with venom. "You may rule for a day, a year, even a hundred years, before another demon, smarter and more powerful than yourself, snatches the throne from your clumsy, grasping fingers. But in your time as ruler you will never be seen as Pyrak's equal. His enemies shall be emboldened, knowing that a mindless buffoon now holds sway in place of their greatest adversary. You are, and have ever been, a joke, and the laughter shall resound through out the Abyss the moment you take this throne."

Pyrak glanced down at the marilith, finding himself surprisingly pleased at the demoness's outburst. Perhaps she understood more than he had suspected. He saw the seed of something new in her, the potential to become something more. A pity he would not live to see that potential fulfilled.

Hedrenatherax's animosity could no longer be contained by this whimsical charade. Heskera's words had stung the balor deeply. He knew

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that all her words, like Grimclaw's, were true, and that he could never create the kind of devotion in others that Pyrak had. Still, the great demon hungered for power, so achingly close now, and he would take it no matter what the consequences.

"Yagur! Neggek! I will give a hundred larva to the one who brings me that bitch's head!" Hedrenatherax spat at his two azodaemons, pointing his sword at Heskera. The two fiends rumbled approval and advanced slowly, feral jaws agape. Hedrenatherax began to move purposefully towards Pyrak, his lips pulled back to reveal rows of sword-like teeth.

Pyrak lifted *Fiendbleeder* from the ground, wincing at the pain it brought to his shoulder. "Go, Heskera! Take them!" The demon lord pointed, motioning for the marilith to engage the azodaemons, while he dealt with Hedrenatherax.

Heskera surged forward, her powerful serpentine body propelling her across the slick stone of the throne room. The two azodaemons rushed to meet her, moving in opposite directions in an attempt to flank the marilith.

Gemnez, sensing that the events he had come to witness were about to unfold, slowly eased his great flabby body away from the action, actually managing to hide most of his bulk behind one of the opulently carved pillars that lined either side of the great hall. He watched as Pyrak purposefully circled left, away from Heskera and the two azodaemons, coaxing Hedrenatherax to do the same.

The demon lord held *Fiendbleeder* in his left hand, balancing the oversized weapon with great difficulty, and moved slowly, but with great precision and economy of motion. Hedrenatherax, who had shifted to meet the great vrock's movement, broke into a dead charge when he reached the last ten yards separating himself and Pyrak.

Hedrenatherax emitted no howl or war cry as he thundered down the hall towards his quarry. The only sounds he made were the fierce pounding of his tread, and the sibilant whisper of his sword cutting the air. Pyrak awaited his adversary calmly, *Fiendbleeder* held before him. There was nothing in his eyes, save acceptance of this final treachery.

The balor reached Pyrak in a blur of red scales and striking steel. His great blade flashed out, a vicious overhand blow that Pyrak halted with a clumsy high parry. The force of Hedrenatherax's strike slammed the flat of *Fiendbleeder*'s blade into the demon lord's face. He stumbled back, momentarily stunned.

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Hedrenatherax did not allow his quarry any respite. He began to hammer away at Pyrak, his jagged sword scraping sparks off *Fiendbleeder* as the demon lord frantically intercepted each colossal cut.

A minute crawled by. Pyrak had yet to take the offensive, his awkward one-handed grip on *Fiendbleeder* barely sufficient to deflect Hedrenatherax's attacks. The balor, however, was growing more confident. Each blow landed with more force but with less finesse, as Hedrenatherax sought to end the battle as quickly as possible. This had always been the great demon's folly, and what happened next took him completely by surprise.

Pyrak suddenly pivoted away from a heavy tailing slash and riposted with stunning accuracy. Hedrenatherax watched *Fiendbleeder* sail in under his own weapon, the great blade arcing upward to remove his right forearm at the elbow. There was a great clatter as his weapon, still gripped by his orphaned right hand, struck the marble floor of the throne room. But far louder was the tremendous crash of his ambitions, as they collided with the unyielding surface of reality.

Stunned, Hedrenatherax could do little but raise the ragged stump of his arm in paltry defense. Pyrak stepped inside his guard and caught him about the throat with one dagger-taloned hand. The demon lord hefted Hedrenatherax from the ground, and then flung him up and over his shoulder to crash head long into the base of the throne, some forty feet away.

Pyrak had used his right arm to hurl Hedrenatherax, and although the pain in his wound was tremendous, the glorious sight of the balor lying crumpled and defeated at the foot of *his* throne was well worth the agony. Perhaps his destiny was not as grim as he had imagined. Pyrak took *Fiendbleeder* in both hands, ignoring the pain it caused him, and moved forward to finish his adversary.

Meanwhile, Heskera had displayed her fearful skill at arms, and in the space of time it had taken Hedrenatherax to charge across the room, have his arm removed, and end his ignoble flight at the foot of Pyrak's throne, she had felled one of the azodaemons, its body rent by nearly a dozen deep, gaping slashes. The remaining azodaemon, wary of the demoness's obvious prowess, pulled back, out of the range of Heskera's sextuplet of gleaming blades.

Although a fearsome warrior, the marilith was most renowned for her skill as a sorcerer, and as the azodaemon disengaged, she put this skill to devastating effect. In a flash, the three swords on Heskera's right side

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disappeared into their sheaths, and the three vacated hands began to weave an intricate arcane pattern.

Realizing what its foe was planning, the azodaemon rushed forward to press her before the spell could reach fruition. But the daemon was far too slow. Heskera croaked the final word to her spell, and a thin green line of eldritch fire leapt from the extended index finger of one of her six hands. The line of arcane energy struck the azodaemon as it surged forward, outlining it in a nimbus of emerald fire. It loosed one desperate agonized howl, and then its body simply crumbled away, reduced to a pile of fine gray ash.

Gemnez watched these startling events from behind his pillar, scarcely able to believe what he was seeing. This day had ever loomed upon the rogue devil's horizon, the day that Pyrak was cast down and all he had accomplished dashed to ruin. All Gemnez *himself* had accomplished would be in jeopardy should this nefarious event come to pass, but he could not intervene. A hundred times he could have crushed Hedrenatherax—he was far more powerful than the balor—but he was not here to rule. To remain neutral, to watch, and encourage the growth of something monumental, that was his duty.

In his fortress, locked away in a long forgotten cell, Gemnez held the damned petitioner that had undoubtedly set these events into motion. A creature of unimaginable power and rarity, this former human, this planar anomaly, was the culmination of all that he had hoped for. Pyrak had set the stage, guided by *Fiendbleeder*, for a new regime to rise, a new power in the Abyss that he, Gemnez, would guide to fruition.

If Pyrak died, then Hedrenatherax would assume power, and although both knew of the damned petitioner, Pyrak's knowledge would become moot upon his death, and Hedrenatherax would care for little beyond spreading the influence of his throne. Gemnez would hold close his prize, the petitioner once known as Hazergal. He would keep him safe, until he was ready to bring forth a plane-shaking transformation.

Things were not, however, transpiring as Gemnez had predicted. Hedrenatherax was seconds away from having his body slashed open by Pyrak, his attempt to usurp the demon lord's power utterly thwarted. With Pyrak in place for another few centuries, Gemnez would be able to accomplish his aims with ease.

Relief, hope, and even joy filled the heart of the rogue devil—until he saw the gleam at the foot of the throne. He realized that Hedrenatherax

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was lying upon *Dreadskewer,* the very weapon that had brought Pyrak low in Avernus. Sick fear uncoiled within Gemnez, as he—not unable, but *unwilling* to act—impotently watched Pyrak's doom unfold.

Stunned and bleeding, Hedrenatherax was brought back to awareness by a burning agony across his back. The balor rolled away from the source of the pain to reveal the long elegant length of *Dreadskewer.* The great spear gleamed foully in the bright light of Pyrak's throne room. It whispered like a murderous viper, demanding to be grasped, held, *used.*

Hedrenatherax heard the demon lord approaching, heard the breath catch in the demon lord's throat as he realized the folly of his errant throw. The pounding thud of Pyrak's charge was all the urging the balor needed, and he snatched up *Dreadskewer* with his left hand, howling in agony as the demon-bane spear burnt his flesh.

Heskera watched Hedrenatherax rise from the ground in a single fluid motion, his left arm arcing back, black smoke rising from the balor's clenched fist as *Dreadskewer* angrily ate away at his flesh. The marilith opened her mouth to call out to her liege, as Pyrak—great sword raised over his head, his feathered breast unprotected—raced forward to cut Hedrenatherax down.

The balor made his cast with Pyrak less than thirty feet away, *Dreadskewer* leaving his hand in a flash of iron. The throw, guided by fate, or destiny, or even *Dreadskewer's* own malicious will, was true, and it slammed into Pyrak's breast with the force of a thunderbolt.

Dreadskewer plowed through Pyrak's flesh unabated by skin, muscle or bone, a full six feet of the fearsome weapon bursting from his back. The demon lord stood, transfixed by the weapon of his enemy, by the cursed ambition of the enemy before him, and the legions of devils that had poured their will and power into *Dreadskewer* itself. His eyes flashed crimson for a moment, and his great beak opened.

"Fool…" he whispered, the slightest trace of mirth evident in the single wheezing utterance. Then his knees buckled, and he sagged to the floor, *Fiendbleeder* sliding from his grasp, clattering uselessly as it struck the ground.

Death claimed Pyrak there before his throne, at the feet of an unworthy enemy, amid the quiet clangor of unstoppable, unfathomable change.

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"No! My lord!" Heskera shrieked as Pyrak sagged to the ground, his upper torso propped up ghoulishly by the spear that transfixed his chest. The marilith saw her own doom at the sight of her liege's inert form. And her eyes unerringly found the architect of that destruction, as he stood stunned by the aftermath of his unlikely victory.

With a clatter of steel Heskera shot toward her enemy, blades whirling about her body in a fierce dance of rage. Hedrenatherax saw her coming, felt the weakness in his body, and knew that she would kill him. His victory over Pyrak would be fleeting, his brutally short reign ended beneath Heskera's six gleaming swords. Clutching the stump of his severed arm to his chest, Hedrenatherax moved to meet Heskera, intent on at least dying in combat.

Gemnez watched, unnoticed by the remaining combatants, as Heskera neared Hedrenatherax. The devil's flabby, red-stained lips were pulled back in a helpless grimace of fear and excitement. "*Kill him, Heskera…*" he hissed, urging the marilith to the murder he knew she ached for.

Hedrenatherax flared his wings, hunched low and held his remaining hand, talons extended, towards Heskera. The balor's power guttered to life, transforming him into a living pillar of flame. Despite this frightening display, Heskera drove forward, silent as grave, an implacable engine of destruction.

A mere ten feet separated the two demons, when the entire palace was rocked with a massive tremor. Hedrenatherax and Heskera were both hurled to the floor. Both demons lay staggered as the tremor ended. Finally, it passed, leaving in its wake an eerie silence, and an unmistakable hum of power.

Groggily, the balor climbed to his feet, his eyes casting about for Heskera. He located her quickly enough, lying in a sprawl not more than ten paces away. Intent on striking at the felled demoness before she could regain her senses, Hedrenatherax saw *Fiendbleeder* at his feet, gleaming murderously beside the corpse of its former owner. Quick as a snake, the balor snatched the gargantuan blade from the ground, balancing its cumbersome weight in his left hand.

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Before Hedrenatherax could take a single step, a violent pain erupted in his mind. A thunderous voice arose, the spoken will of a presence so large his head seemed strained to bursting by the mere attempt to contain it.

DROP ME, FOOL!

Hedrenatherax sank to his knees, blind with agony. His fingers splayed open with the jolt, and he let *Fiendbleeder* slide from his grasp.

Pain receded from Hedrenatherax swiftly on the heels of *Fiendbleeder's* unmelodious clang to the ground. The balor's vision cleared, and he saw Heskera before him. The marilith had abandoned all her swords save one, the largest, which she gripped in the topmost of her six sets of hands.

Heskera grinned savagely, her beautiful features twisted beyond recognition by her triumphant wrath. The marilith's sword swept back and over her head, arms arced to deliver every ounce of strength into the blow that would end Hedrenatherax. The balor closed his eyes and waited. All hope and ambition had fled. He would die on his knees, ignoble and broken.

Gemnez had managed to remain standing through the bizarre tremor that had shaken the palace. He had watched the fall of the two combatants and the balor's failed attempt to claim Fiendbleeder. Dread was replaced by glee as Heskera had slithered up to the stricken Hedrenatherax, preparing to end his coup with one swing of her sword.

Seconds whispered past, and Hedrenatherax waited for the bite of the marilith's steel. Then he heard Heskera gasp, followed by the dull clatter of her sword striking the stone floor.

Hedrenatherax opened his eyes to see the marilith backpedaling, her face contorted in terror. The demoness's eyes were fixed on a point over Hedrenatherax's head, and he turned to see the cause.

From over Hedrenatherax's shoulder, Gemnez saw the corpse of Pyrak suddenly suffused with a bluish glow. The corpse twitched and jerked spasmodically. Then, with the shuddering movements of undeath, Pyrak reached up and grasped *Dreadskewer,* pulling it from his chest with one titanic jerk.

This is what had caused Heskera to falter, sword poised over her head, mouth slack with fear and awe. When Pyrak lurched to his feet, she had dropped her weapon, backing away from the awful apparition of her former lord.

Hedrenatherax had turned around to see Pyrak shambling towards him. Shaking, he climbed slowly to his feet, transfixed. The slain demon

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lord's animated body was overflowing with the strange blue light. It burst from his eyes and poured forth in a river of azure flame from his mouth. Despite the power and fury of this manifestation, there was no life in Pyrak. His movements were barely controlled spasms, as if the demon lord was a puppet controlled by the palsied hands of an aged puppeteer.

Hedrenatherax did not flinch as Pyrak stopped a mere five feet away. The slain demon lord's mouth opened. A voice boiled forth, a bottomless, hollow sound that smote the minds of the three fiends in the room with unfathomable dread.

"Hedrenatherax…" the balor's name spilled out from Pyrak's mouth. "*Usurper, do you claim this body's rank and power?*"

Hedrenatherax stared, mute with terror, at the glowing corpse of his former liege. The balor's mind struggled to make sense of the words that had issued from Pyrak's slack, open mouth. His fear was great, but even greater was his desire to rule.. "Yes, I claim this throne," Hedrenatherax said.

There was a moment of silence, broken only by Heskera's frantic mumbling, as she attempted a teleportation spell, her third since Pyrak's corpse had arisen. Like the two attempts before, the spell failed.

Then, suddenly, Pyrak's corpse lurched forward, and grasped Hedrenatherax on either side of his face with its taloned hands. The balor struggled to pull away, but the grip that held him was implacable, unbreakable.

"*Then accept our blessing, demon."* The voice, an almost disembodied whisper, rushed like an ill wind from Pyrak's mouth.

The talons locked about Hedrenatherax's head, then fumbled down towards his mouth, fingers gouging into his lips and gums. The balor whipped his head back and forth frantically, but was held fast. The corpse's hands pried open Hedrenatherax's mouth, spreading the fanged orifice wide. It then drew him close, embracing him, like some demented lover..

Hedrenatherax screamed. But not long, as the corpse that was Pyrak placed its own gaping jaws over the balor's and vomited forth the blue flames that filled it.

The balor's mind clouded with visions of his past. He saw his own life as a mortal, long forgotten in the countless millennia he had been a demon. Blurred images flashed to a slime-choked spawning pool, where a dretch that would one day be Hedrenatherax pulled itself from the muck. Hedrenatherax saw a battlefield, Avernus, where he, now a vrock, rallied

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to the call of a demon lord named Pazuzu. On and on the visions moved, dragging him through each phase of his existence. Hezrou, nalfeshnee, marilith—all the forms of demonic power he had held, each giving way to more powerful forms beyond.

Finally, he saw the mighty balor that he had become, there in the throne room of Pyrak. On bended knee, he had pledged his allegiance to the demon lord, an allegiance he had shattered on this very day.

The visions suddenly ceased. Hedrenatherax tumbled to the floor as the suddenly limp and lifeless body of Pyrak released him, resuming the cold immutability of death. Agony unlike anything Hedrenatherax had ever known gripped him. He felt his bones shift beneath his skin, the muscles and tissue stretching, changing. He opened his mouth to scream, but only a thin mewl escaped his pain wracked body.

Heskera cowered against the huge double doors of the throne room. She had tried in vain to wrench them open, but they were held fast by some unseen force. She saw Gemnez, standing beside one of the pillars that lined the walls, his eyes fixed in horror on the writhing form of Hedrenatherax.

"Gemnez!" Heskera shouted. "Help me open the door!"

The great bloated devil turned slowly to her, his lips pressed together in a thin smile. "I cannot," he said, his voice distant. "I must not interfere."

"He will kill us both, fool!" Heskera cried.

"Perhaps, but there is naught I can do. We cannot turn aside the course of fate, my dear."

Enraged, Heskera rushed towards Gemnez, her six hands hooked into talons to tear the fat devil to shreds. A ringing shriek from Hedrenatherax caused her to falter, and almost against her will she turned to look upon the balor's ascension.

The balor was now standing, his red-scaled skin mottled with patches of creeping black, patches that seemed to grow and spread like a disease upon his flesh. His whole body writhed, bulging and contorting with the changes beneath his skin. Bones cracked. Heskera watched as the balor's legs gained girth and length, stretching the demon to a towering new stature.

Hedrenatherax could finally scream. He stood, arms outstretched, his massive chest expanding to accommodate the rapid growth of his internal organs. The balor's skin was now almost completely black, glistening with a polished sheen, as if he had been carved from ebony. His right arm, truncated by *Fiendbleeder,* was undergoing a severe transmogrification.

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The bones slid, growing out of the wound and sharpening to a point. The lengthening spur reached a length of nearly eight feet before it began to thicken, finally taking the shape of a huge curving blade, a living sickle of bone. The skin covering Hedrenatherax's upper arm snaked forward, stretching to cover his new limb with shining black flesh.

Hedrenatherax's head, already nightmarish, grew even more terrible. His wide fanged mouth expanded, almost bisecting his head. Two tusks suddenly thrust forward from his lower jaw, growing rapidly into dagger-like protrusions. The balor's backward curving horns twisted forward, grinding against his skull as they moved through the flesh of his head like a sculptor's knife through clay. They reached their final position, jutting forward from his brow, and lengthened, until they stood like two spears, spiraling four feet above Hedrenatherax's head. Finally, the balor's wings crumpled and fell from his shoulders, rapidly decaying into piles of putrid slime.

The screaming stopped. A great sigh of relief burst from the new demon lord. He stood and looked down at his new body, red eyes gleaming with delight. He raised his right arm, now a deadly weapon of razored bone, and glanced down the length of the throne room. At its end, Heskera was slamming all of her six fists against the unyielding doors. Hedrenatherax grinned, his twin tusks arcing up over his fanged smile. He snarled incoherently and burst into a dead run.

The newly birthed demon lord's massive frame, half again as large as his former body, thundered towards Heskera, bone sickle cocked back like a fist. Heskera watched him come with terror-filled eyes, frantically waving her hands in the practiced patterns of a spell. The spell flashed at its completion, and a bolt of silver fire spat forth from her outstretched hand to strike the charging demon lord full in the chest. But the eldritch energy spattered harmlessly against the mirrored black scales that covered Hedrenatherax's body.

"No! Wait!" Heskera screamed, throwing her hands up to ward off the unstoppable doom that rushed towards her. "My lord, I…!" She cried, her words suddenly cut short as Hedrenatherax bore down on her, his right arm flashing forward to bring the terrible bone sickle into a single killing stroke. The bone blade bit into Heskera just below her navel, driven by the weight and momentum of the reborn demon's charge.

The marilith's body simply came apart in a spray of ichor and entrails, bisected completely. Her upper torso thudded to the ground, all six arms

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twitching spasmodically, while her serpentine lower half thrashed wildly in its death throes. She tried to speak, but all that issued from her mouth was a great gout of her own viscous blood. She died quietly, her eyes staring up into the grinning visage of Hedrenatherax, his bestial features filled with hatred and triumph.

The new-made demon lord turned, his bone sickle dripping Heskera's blood, and saw Gemnez. The devil stood calmly, betraying none of the terror that filled his heart. "And what of you, fat one?"

Gemnez fell to his knees and bowed his head. "My lord, I am at your service."

Chuckling foully, Hedrenatherax strode up to the kneeling devil, laying the point of his sickle arm upon the devil's broad back. "That's right you great, bloated fool. You serve *me* now," Hedrenatherax hissed venomously.

"Yes, my lord. I serve you," Gemnez agreed quietly.

"Good. Now get up, and get back to Gemnez Drak. I want those spawning pits running constantly." Hedrenatherax lifted his bladed arm from Gemnez, turned, and began walking towards the throne. "I have an army to build," he said over his shoulder.

Gemnez stood. "Of course, my liege, at once." The devil hurried to the throne room doors, stepping over the grisly mess that was once Heskera. Immense relief flooded through him, as both doors swung silently open to his lightest touch. He stepped through and was gone.

Hedrenatherax settled into the throne once occupied by his former master, and gazed down at the carnage that filled *his* throne room. He had not expected the physical transformation that had made him a demon lord, nor did he know what entities had anointed him with this new majesty, but no matter. All that mattered was that he had won.

He saw *Fiendbleeder* gleaming dully on the stone floor, and his face creased in a grimace. It was the very center of Pyrak's power, and it had rejected Hedrenatherax.

His gaze traveled over to *Dreadskewer,* the very weapon that had given him his victory over Pyrak. It had been created by devils to slay demons. The new demon lord chuckled. He doubted that *Dreadskewer's* creators had ever dreamed it would be used in the way it had been today—to grant one demon victory over another.

There was so much to do, so much empire to build, but Hedrenatherax pushed these thoughts aside. His gaze lingered upon the corpse of Pyrak,

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and he allowed himself to savor the triumph he had so long yearned for. He would sort out the difficulties of his new domain in time. But today, he would simply bask in the glory of his ascension, and gloat over the shattered bodies of his enemies.

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Pyrak had watched his own death unfold with a detached resignation. There was a sting of remorse, yes, but only that had known his fate, yet failed to reckon with it. *Dreadskewer* and Hedrenatherax were merely the tools destiny had chosen to bring about his end. The languid flight of that awful spear, propelled by the traitor's hand, had served but as a final confirmation. The Abyss, it seemed, had no further use of him.

As *Dreadskewer* burst through his chest, Pyrak had felt little pain, But he heard the maniacal glee of the sentient weapon, a voice quite unlike the cruel monotone of *Fiendbleeder.* The demon-bane spear inundated his mind with childish mockery, a petulant celebration. The taunting cadence of *Dreadskewer* followed Pyrak down into oblivion before fading, at last, with the rest of his existence. He welcomed the onrushing darkness, accepting the void with gratitude—eager, at long last, to escape.

But as always, the demon lord's fate was not his to decide.

* * * * *

With a abrupt surge of light, Pyrak was pulled back into the world of his senses.

He awoke to dim yellow light and silence. His body sprawled ignobly, limbs splayed upon the polished stone floor of a large room. With a vanishing grogginess, Pyrak rolled up to a half-sitting, half-kneeling position and regarded the polished stone floor.

A beaked countenance stared back at him from the mirrored surface. It was his own face, but there were subtle differences. The minor imperfections in his feathers and skin were gone, as were the scars of many battles. It was not the true face of his waking life, he knew, not the face he would have seen in a real reflection. Rather, it was the self he carried in his mind. Had he been mortal, he might have known it from a dream.

Pyrak felt renewed strength in his limbs. He glanced over to his left shoulder, the place where *Dreadskewer* had made its first mark. The wound, as well as the pain that accompanied it, was gone. There was not even a scar.

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Intrigued, the demon lord climbed to his feet, surveying his new surroundings. It was a throne room, not unlike the one in what had been his palace. The room was hexagonal, with the throne itself in the northern end of the room, framed by a huge cloth banner of flaming crimson.

The overall color scheme was black and red, with floors of polished onyx, and pillars of red marble in each of the room's six corners. The ceiling soared over Pyrak's head, dwarfing even his own near twenty-foot stature.

The southern end of the room held what appeared to be the only exit, a looming set of black iron doors. Pyrak made his way to this egress, his talons clicking on the stone floor. There were no pull rings, so the demon lord simply gave the doors a stout push, expecting them to swing open behind the force of his exertion.

He might as well have been pushing against a castle wall. The doors budged not an inch. Perplexed, Pyrak turned around and saw that he was no longer alone.

"Where are you going, demon?" a bearded human asked as he lounged in the throne that had been empty a few seconds ago. He wore a mocking grin, one that Pyrak somehow knew.

"Where am I?" Pyrak growled, clenching his talons and stalking toward the throne.

"Nowhere," the human said. "But you must admit it is far better than the place you *were* going."

"I was dead, and quite happy to be so," Pyrak said coldly. "Who are you, and what is this place?"

"Oh, my dear demon, you don't recognize me?" The bearded human pouted. "After so long, I must admit, you wound me."

"What are you—" Pyrak stopped. His eyes blazed with fear and recognition. "*Fiendbleeder!*" he spat, at last. "What have you done?"

"So ungrateful," the human sighed. "What I have done is rescue you from oblivion. What I have done is given you the chance to strike back at your enemies. What I have done is allowed you to *live again.*"

"Hah!" Pyrak snorted. "Yes, as always, you have my best interests in mind, I'm sure. Where am I, and what is this face you wear? It is strangely familiar."

"As to where you are, that is difficult to explain," *Fiendbleeder* began. "When you were slain, I took possession of your soul. You are within me, a guest in my own consciousness. This place is merely a construct

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I have created."

Pyrak could not speak. His chest tightened, as if the heart of this imaginary body had stopped. Hopelessness clawed at him. Even death had not freed him from *Fiendbleeder*. He would go on, possibly for eternity, trapped within its eldritch black steel. When he recovered his breath, he could only whisper, forlornly, "Why?"

"Because I still have need of you," *Fiendbleeder* said flatly, ignoring Pyrak's obvious agony. There was no pity in *Fiendbleeder*. There was only cold, hard purpose, coupled with dire will. "To answer your second question, demon, the face I wear is that of Hazergal Redfist, a once mortal wizard. This throne room was drawn from his mind. Your familiarity is not misplaced; you have met him before. He died and was consigned to Abrigor as one of the damned. Hedrenatherax found him and brought him before you. Do you remember?"

"Yes," Pyrak said. "I remember."

"No, what Hedrenatherax told you about that petitioner was not nonsense," *Fiendbleeder* said. "Hazergal *has* retained his abilities. Perhaps some of his memory as well. In fact, he may be far more powerful now than ever he was in life. In truth, not even I understand the full nature of this. What I do understand is that he is pivotal in our conquest of the Hells. It is we who must control his destiny."

Pyrak stared at him "Our conquest?" he repeated. "You mean *your* conquest. This petty conflict should have ended centuries ago. It is utterly pointless."

"Perhaps," *Fiendbleeder* hissed. "But nevertheless, you shall continue to serve me. In whatever capacity I wish."

"And if I refuse?" Pyrak asked. His words were a threat, and he flared his wings to emphasize that fact.

The bearded caricature on the throne grinned. In that simple movement of his lips, Pyrak saw an eternity of malice and treachery. "Then you will spend eternity in an all together less…comfortable setting."

Suddenly the walls of the throne room shifted and disappeared, wavering into a blackness that was quickly replaced with a hellish red glow. *Fiendbleeder* and Hazergal's throne room were gone, and Pyrak found himself standing on the scorched battlefield of Avernus. The demon lord searched the endless red horizon. He saw nothing but an eternity of baked earth.

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"I have been here before, sword!" Pyrak shouted into the empty air. "You will have to do much more than this to frighten me."

The demon lord's reply came as a low rumbling moan, rising up from the ground and filling the dead air around him. He looked down and saw that the red clay beneath his feet had begun to grow viscous and thick.

Alarmed, Pyrak tried to spread his wings and escape to the air, but found that he could not fly. The strength in his body had simply drained away. He began to sink into the churning red morass, utterly helpless.

"Enough of your games, *Fiendbleeder!*" Pyrak called out. He had sunk to his waist, and the dreadful moaning that filled the air suddenly rose to a high-pitched wail. The demon lord felt shapes moving around his lower body through the sucking ooze that held him, and the first seeds of fear found purchase in his gut.

The churning in the pit grew in intensity. Suddenly the shapes that swarmed around his legs and stomach broke the surface, materializing from the liquid of his viscous prison. There was a vaguely humanoid form to these shapes. Each had a set of glaring red eyes that roved almost independently through the liquid contours of the creature's head. They were also equipped with mouth-like orifices, each filled with a forest of bone-like spurs, that emitted the awful wail filling the air.

Horror dawned upon Pyrak; he recognized these creatures. They were lemures, the damned souls of the Nine Hells, sentenced to live out eternity in formless agony. Frantic, Pyrak tried in vain to move, to get away, but his limbs would not respond. The lemures' eyes lit up in delight at their hapless victim, and they full upon him in waves.

The pain was indescribable. The lemures tore and chewed at Pyrak's body, adding his black blood to the bubbling morass of their domain. He screamed until his voice was nothing more than a rasping croak, screamed until he coughed up the shredded gobbets of his own vocal chords. His body writhed with a torrent of devouring lemures, greedily feasting upon his imprisoned flesh.

And when he had reached the point of madness, when the lemures had chewed his limbs down to the bone, and the pain had reached an incomprehensible plateau, it stopped. Darkness descended, and when it lifted, Pyrak found himself whole and hale again, standing before *Fiendbleeder* in Hazergal's throne room.

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"Had enough, demon?" *Fiendbleeder* asked, his smile bearing the threat of further torment.

Pyrak was nearly unhinged with the memory of the horrid pit of lemures, but he found his voice nonetheless. "Yes, please. No more," he croaked. The piteous tone of his words sickened him, but he had no choice.

"Good!" *Fiendbleeder* exclaimed. "What I have in mind for you is far better than spending eternity being devoured by lemures. Now, come close. We have much to discuss."

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Hazergal stared at the four gray walls of his cell, enjoying the quiet. The tomb-like silence that reigned in the under halls of Gemnez Drak was a welcome change. He sat upon the floor, long spindly limbs wrapped about his babau body cradling himself in a multi-jointed embrace.

The door to Hazergal's cell stood open. It had been flung wide, when the great bloated devil Gemnez had rushed out with Hedrenatherax, and never closed. Hazergal eyed the open door and considered getting up and fleeing. He had considered it a dozen times in the endless hours since Gemnez's departure. But each time his mind lingered upon the prospect of escape, he was brought back to what lay past the open door.

There was no freedom to be found beyond this room, only the grim lightless halls of Gemnez Drak and, if he somehow found his way out, the Abyss itself. No matter how tempting escape from this cell might seem, Hazergal knew that he would find only further misery once he crossed the threshold.

No, he would stay here, wait for Gemnez to return, and accept whatever mercy the fat fiend would offer.

At least there was no fear to be found in the tired silence of his resignation, he had left that useless weight tied to his corpse back in Othregard. And he remembered Othregard now. He remembered many things—he had searched his mind, in his quiet seclusion, and recalled more details of his old life. When Azadan's blade had taken that life, this new one—this nightmare— had begun. Now, he maintained the hope that this nightmare might finally come to an end. Be it harbinger or omen, he had found some sense of peace. He would either live on, or be destroyed, and that was that. He believed that a second death would result in quiet oblivion, and if it came to that, he would accept the void.

But as much as he desired an end to this torment, part of his personality was still the power-hungry wizard, and that part was intrigued by his new life. He could not deny his fascination with his bodily transformation, or the near godlike magical might that ached to pour forth at every opportunity.

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There was purpose behind this, he was sure of it. But what, or who, could be driving his anomalous fate? That answer was beyond his grasp, and this only compounded his anger and frustration.

More unanswerable questions sprang to mind. Was he to be a demon lord? A demigod? Whatever the final outcome, the possibilities were enough to spur this devil Gemnez to furious action. It was if the rogue Infernal had been waiting for his arrival, perhaps even foreseen it.

As far as Hazergal knew, only Gemnez, Hedrenatherax, and the demon lord Pyrak had any knowledge of his unique talents. Pyrak had shown little interest in him, but Hedrenatherax had been on the receiving end of the former archmage's wild magic twice. No doubt the balor would gladly tear him limb from limb if there were not more pressing matters to garner his attention—such as his attempt to assassinate his liege and usurp lordship of this Abyssal layer.

Hazergal believed that a confrontation between Pyrak and Hedrenatherax could work to his benefit. He had little doubt that Pyrak, even in his weakened state, would crush the upstart balor, removing the former archmage's most eminent threat. If, however, Hedrenatherax managed to overcome the demon lord, Hazergal knew that the usurping balor would most certainly seek to avenge his past humiliations—and would now possess the resources to do so.

All in all, Hazergal could do little to guide his own destiny. He could not fight the entire Abyss, and eventually his peculiar ability would bring the whole plane down on him.

The limitless arcane might locked within his brain offered little security. He had little doubt that he could decimate an army of fiends, even Gemnez or Hedrenatherax, if he put any real effort into it, but that would earn him little more than further misery. Even if he were to overcome the hordes of demons that would certainly seek to destroy him, recent events had left him with no desire to rule upon this blighted plane.

In truth, it was Gemnez who held Hazergal, not with chains or prison cells, but with the whisper of hope. Hope that the great devil might offer some respite from the madness his existence had become. The rogue Infernal was obviously fascinated with Hazergal's strange abilities. No doubt he had conceived of a way to use the former archmage to better his own position.

This Hazergal could he live with, for he was fascinated with the great fiend in kind. There was more to Gemnez than the fat, slobbering fiend

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he appeared to be, and Hazergal had a feeling that the devil would play a large part in whatever fate befell him.

It seemed days had passed since Gemnez had left, but this was not disconcerting. Time was notoriously dubious in the Abyss, seeming to stretch or compact at whim. But the heavy tread of Gemnez's ponderous feet thumping down the hall towards Hazergal's cell seemed to snap time back into its rightful flow. As the huge devil squeezed his bulk through the narrow cell door, it was plain to see that he was not pleased.

"Pyrak is dead," Gemnez spat, the words almost gagging him. "That great lumbering fool Hedrenatherax has become the newest pet of Fortune. And now he sits upon the throne."

"How did this happen?" Hazergal asked, a wave of despair washing over him. "I thought Pyrak was stronger."

Gemnez sighed deeply, exhaling a torrent of frustration—and perhaps even remorse. "Fate, my friend. Fate and whatever lunacy controls this blasted plane." The rogue devil scowled deeply. "I cannot explain this, but I know that there are forces beyond my understanding. Those forces are manipulating this twisted skein, and you and I along with it."

"If Hedrenatherax has usurped Pyrak's power, then will he not come looking for me?" Hazergal asked.

Gemnez smiled wide, his eyes crackling with devious mirth. "Well, I will say this, Hedrenatherax's ascension has not sharpened his wits. He is so glutted with power and self importance at the moment that I think he has forgotten all about you." The huge devil laughed. "But his stupor will not last, the defeats you have dealt him in the past will surely haunt him, and he will seek to keep them from becoming public knowledge."

"Then what is to become of me? Of you?"

Gemnez's great flabby lips, red with their garish painting, came together in a hideous smile. "You, my strange friend, shall remain here, while we do all we can to delude our new leader that you are, in fact, dead."

"*Dead?*" Hazergal scowled, stepping back against the far wall of his cell, a dozen lethal spells springing to the fore of his mind.

Gemnez saw the reaction, and twisted his monstrous face into a very believable pout. "Come now, Hazergal, if I wished you dead, would I have come her alone and unprepared? In truth, I doubt that I would be able to best you in such a confrontation, but I assure you, it will not come to that. You and I need one another. You need my ample resources and influence

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to remain hidden. I need to see a fundamental change in the order of the Abyss, a change which I believe you represent."

Hazergal relaxed. He let himself slide down the wall. then sat with his back propped against it. "The Abyss has not changed since the dawn of time. Why would it happen now?"

"Because, in countless millennia, *you* are the only damned petitioner to retain his memories and former abilities. What's more, I have witnessed what you are capable of, and I think you have only scratched the surface of your potential." Gemnez's eyes were filled with passion, and Hazergal could see he believed every word he had spoken.

"Have you considered that I have no desire to change the Abyss?" Hazergal countered. "That I have no desire to be here at all?"

"*Of course you do not want to be here*!" Gemnez spat, ire creeping into his words. "What mortal since the dawn of time has wanted to end up in the Abyss? Your own desires are nothing. They do not hold a candle to the sleeping giant within you. And regardless of what you want, what slumbers within will awaken, and neither you nor I can halt the course of *that* fate."

"Do you think I want to rule here, to govern a layer of the Abyss like one of these puling demon lords?" Hazergal shouted, climbing to his feet. "The only reason I *am* here is because I failed as a sovereign. I could not control even my most trusted lieutenant." Azadan's face loomed in his mind. Hazergal wondered if Pyrak had felt the same bitter twist of fate when Hedrenatherax had ended *his* life.

"Ahh, there it is," the devil whispered. His voice dripped with contempt. "The ridiculous mortal concept of free will and choice. Do you think, if you had been a better ruler, that events would have unfolded differently?"

"Of course!" Hazergal barked. "If I had foreseen Azadan's betrayal, then I could have taken steps to prevent it. I would have avoided my own death and the gods-forsaken events that have led to this conversation."

"Then you have no idea how the universe truly works," Gemnez said, with a mirthless chuckle. "No matter what you might have changed in your past life, it would not have mattered. Anything you could have done differently would still result in you standing before me, here in Gemnez Drak, whining about choice. It is Fate, pure and simple. And there is no way to avoid it."

"How can you know this? How can you be so sure?" Hazergal asked, stabbing one spindly finger at Gemnez.

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"Because I have seen things in both the Abyss and the Nine Hells that you could scarcely imagine. I've seen armies of celestials swarming the skies of Avernus in a fruitless attempt to rest control of the Hells away from the archdevils. I've seen hordes of demons, crashing into the arrayed phalanxes of devils in a pointless confrontation that benefits neither side, battles made all the more idiotic in that neither the Abyss nor the Hells has learned a single thing in millions of similar conflicts. All these things I have seen, and the one thing I have taken away from all of this lunacy—the one insight I've gained—is that the universe takes no sides. It operates in a state of balance, giving no philosophical concept, be it chaos or law, or even the antiquated notions of good and evil, the power to overthrow the others." Gemnez paused and smiled, as if reveling in the crux of his argument. "There is no choice in any of this. We do what we are made to do. You, me, Pyrak even that great oaf Hedrenatherax—we are all pawns in a game where the ultimate conclusion has been predetermined."

"Then why try to change things? Why even pretend that you, or me, or anyone can change what has already been ordained?"

"Because, the universe has grown stale. The foundation is cracking, and I believe that the balance is shifting too far towards one ideological concept." The Infernal leaned close. "And I believe, that every few eons, there are some that *do* have a choice, that *do* have the ability to guide fate and put the balance right again."

"You mean *me,* of course." Hazergal said, turning away from the rancid stench of Gemnez's breath.

"Yes, you," the devil whispered. "While you could never alter the events that brought you here—they were set into motion long before your existence—I believe you *can* choose what happens now. There is no doubt that the threads of this peculiar fate push us in one inexorable direction. But you and I alone can see behind the curtain. We can divine the complicated workings of destiny, mold it, and shape it to our wills."

"But for what purpose? Why was *I* chosen?" Hazergal asked.

Gemnez shrugged his massive shoulders. "Who can say? In the end it doesn't matter, you cannot change it. You can only embrace and accept your fate, *then* master it, and become what you are meant to be."

Hazergal sat down again, wrapping his limbs about his body. "It seems I have little choice. Regardless of any of your philosophical gibberish, I either trust you or be destroyed by Hedrenatherax and his minions."

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"Well, that's simplifying it a bit, but true nonetheless." The bloated devil squeezed his bulk through the cell door, and motioned Hazergal to follow. "There will be time later to discuss all of this in detail, but now we must hurry."

Hazergal got up and followed Gemnez from his cell and through the tunnels. "What are you planning, Gemnez?"

"Why, to hide you of course?" the devil answered over his shoulder.

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"You will see," Gemnez replied. "Trust me."

* * * * *

They reached the upper levels of Gemnez's fortress, and made their way out into the horrific courtyard that Hazergal recognized as the inner sanctum of Gemnez Drak. Contained by looming walls of dark stone and carpeted with the bleached bones of demons, devils and other unrecognizable creatures, the courtyard still reeked of death, brutality and endless torture.

They emerged into the sickly green light of an Abyssal day, and Hazergal realized that they were not alone. Uzog, Gemnez's bison-headed servant, awaited behind a trio of vrocks. The mammoth demon watched idly as the winged demons paced in agitation, each heavy tread crunching audibly as they ground the osseous carpeting to powder. When they caught sight of Gemnez and Hazergal they burst into a screeching tirade.

"Is this what you have promised us, Gemnez?" the largest of the vrocks called. "This is the one that Hedrenatherax wants?"

Hazergal stopped and stared aghast at Gemnez, cursing himself for not expecting just such a betrayal. But the huge devil merely winked, and Hazergal heard the devil's voice in his thoughts. *Calm yourself. All is well.*

Gemnez suddenly grabbed Hazergal about the shoulders with two flabby paws, holding him tight with irresistible strength. "Yes, this is the babau Lord Hedrenatherax desires. It will make a fine gift from his loyal servants, a gift that will certainly earn an even greater reward."

"Then hand him over, fat one. I can only tolerate your odiferous presence for so long," the lead vrock croaked. He stepped forward, talons extended to grasp his prize.

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Hazergal did not struggle against Gemnez's grip. He found that his mind was quiet, preparing to unleash a torrent of magical hell on everyone in the courtyard.

No! Hazergal heard the Infernal's voice echo in his mind. *Do nothing. I have not betrayed you.* Gemnez glanced at Uzog, where the huge demon leaned on an iron maul.

"Uzog, now," the devil said quietly, and then the courtyard exploded into furious violence. Nearly twenty-five feet tall, Uzog was one of the largest demons Hazergal had ever seen. When his maul came crashing down upon the first vrock, there was little left but pulped flesh and feathers.

"Treachery!" the big vrock that had sought to claim Hazergal shouted. It leapt forward, beak agape. Hazergal felt Gemnez's grip on his shoulders slacken, and a spell rolled off his tongue in a liquid slur of arcane syllables. The spell was one that Hazergal had been fond of in his former life and required use of the Dark Speech, a blasphemous tongue known only to those who practiced the foulest of magic.

Its effect was horrific and instantaneous. The charging vrock suddenly stopped its forward momentum, pain clouding its avian features, talons clutching its abdomen. The vrock's belly was rapidly distending, inflating like an air bladder, giving the demon a ridiculous bloated look. The vrock loosed one long agonized shriek before its belly burst, spraying blood and viscera in all directions. The rupture contained enough force to propel the demon backwards to collapse in its own stinking gore, dead before its body touched the earth.

Gemnez looked down at Hazergal, smiling in mild amusement. "I must confess, in all my years, I have never seen *that* spell before. Quite effective though it is."

Hazergal did not reply. He was preparing another spell to dispatch the remaining vrock, but soon saw there was no need. The metallic thud of Uzog's maul resounded through the courtyard, and the corpse of the final vrock hurdled over their heads to crash lifeless into the black stone wall of Gemnez Drak.

"Well done, Uzog," Gemnez said to the hulking, bull-headed demon. "Now, gather the bodies." The giant demon loosed a thick grunt in reply and then set about collecting the shattered corpses of the three vrocks, which he piled before his master in a stinking heap of blood and feathers.

"Am I to hide beneath their carcasses?" Hazergal asked sarcastically.

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"Of course not. You are to consume them," Gemnez said. "I believe that is how you effected your last transformation."

"How can you know this?" Hazergal asked, his voice heavy with shame.

"Because the babau you destroyed after your initial flight from Gemnez Drak were found without their hearts. As you now must certainly know, a demon's essence—its life force—is contained within its heart."

"I cannot do this…again," Hazergal whispered. He remembered vividly the three babau he had slain shortly after his transformation into a dretch. He remembered the insatiable hunger, the way he had clawed through each corpse, ripping the heart free and devouring it with the greed of a hungry beggar.

"Oh come now, don't get squeamish on me," Gemnez chided, his monstrous face contorting in a scowl. "What about the two vrocks you slew upon the planes of Vrack? You consumed them as well."

Hazergal had ceased to be amazed at Gemnez's store of information. The vrocks he had slain in his flight had also been absorbed, but had not triggered a transformation. Since Gemnez knew so much else, his ghoulish assumption that the essence of three slain demons in the courtyard would be enough to fuel another change was probably right as well.

But still, Hazergal was loath to do it. With each new form he had lost some of himself, as if the demonic flesh that housed his mind and soul was slowly eating away at his humanity. But there was little doubt that his fate, so painfully described by Gemnez, lay before him, in the shattered corpses of the three vrocks.

Hazergal felt the air thicken. Sounds became muffled, and the very weight of the virulent green sky seemed to press down upon him. He felt the threads of fate unravel, felt the implacable embrace of destiny slacken, and he knew that the choice he made here was his and his alone. Despite his dreams of emptiness, despite all his longing for an end to the nightmare in which he had unwittingly been cast as a major player, the desire for continued existence lingered, and it spurred him to action.

Hazergal walked slowly toward the tangled jumble of vrock corpses, falling to his knees before the great stinking pile of demonic flesh. He cast one long sorrowful look back at Gemnez, whose wide reptilian features held nothing but stolid determination, and then, with the slow resignation of the damned, Hazergal began to feed.

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Book 2:
The Tides of Chaos

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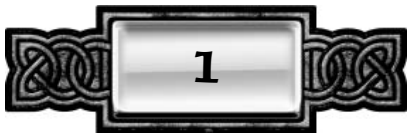

Hedrenatherax brooded silently upon his throne, as if crushed against it by a great weight.. The fledgling demon lord was not new to the political maneuverings and power struggles of the Abyss, but the small portion of demonic politics he had tasted as a balor was nothing compared to the sheer madness of trying to control an entire plane, or fend off rival demon lords who smelled an easy conquest.

Though Hedrenatherax's ascension had earned him a power many would covet, it had also brought the unenviable task of maintaining and ruling a state made up of the multiverse's most chaotic and insubordinate creatures – his fellow demons.

Unlike his predecessor, the new demon lord's attentions were undivided. The fallen Pyrak had been obsessed with the eternal conflict with the devils. Since replacing him, Hedrenatherax had concerned himself only with expanding his control and territory in the Abyss. Yet his greater focus had brought him little success.

In the few short years of his reign, Hedrenatherax had already slain nearly a dozen assassins, each a would-be demon lord eager to usurp his power just as he had usurped Pyrak's. Even in death, it seemed Pyrak could engender more loyalty than his successor, a fact that enraged the new demon lord to no end.

Few demons understood better than Hedrenatherax how to instill terror and obtain the obedience of his demons through sheer brutality. But he could not understand how Pyrak had earned the level of respect that his underlings had shown him. It was inconceivable that a demon would do anything that did not result in immediate personal gain. The concept of a demon lord treating his subjects with anything but the contempt they deserved was absurd. They existed to serve *him*, nothing more, and if they did not serve they were destroyed. This was the Abyss, and might made right. Period. Those that had power strove to preserve it, those without, strove to attain it. Yet somehow, it seemed many of Pyrak's creatures had *wanted* to serve him.

The new Lord of Vrack glanced down the empty hall that housed

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his throne. It was nothing like Pyrak's throne room, with its airy, graceful architecture. But that place was no more. Hedrenatherax had brought Pyrak's floating citadel crashing down into the windswept plains of Vrack shortly after claiming power. Now, the citadel was little more than a shattered ruin, the wind-scoured lair for hordes of lesser demons.

Hedrenatherax had built an abode more to his liking many miles from Pyrak's ruined fortress, a squat yet imposing keep of black stone, as ugly and sinister as its lord. At its center was Hedrenatherax's throne room, a gloomy octagon of iron and stone. Green flames rose from black braziers, suffusing the room with a foul smelling smoke. The flames were always guttering, but never extinguished, and within the long, flickering shadows they cast lay the demon lord's throne. It was a simple iron seat, gargantuan in proportion, without adornment or grace. Above this gargoyle-like seat of power, the mummified corpse of Pyrak hung from the wall like a grotesque puppet. Beside this ghoulish display was mounted the great black sword *Fiendbleeder*, naked and gleaming in the ephemeral light. The new demon lord had declared that these macabre trophies would remain in the throne room of Hedrax—for so he had named his citadel—for all time. Which meant, of course, for as long as Hedrenatherax held power.

The day that he had slain Pyrak had been a jubilant one for Hedrenatherax, and his dreams of conquest had not waned. It was his ability to achieve those dreams that fell short. He had taken all the necessary actions to cement his power. Every potential threat Hedrenatherax could think of was eliminated with brutal tenacity. Whether major or minor, no foe escaped his personal attention. Even the humble petitioner who had captured the attention of Pyrak in the final days of his rule was not suffered to live. In fact, Hedrenatherax 's first piece of business had been a visit to Gemnez Drak, where he sought the troublesome petitioner. It had been a thorn in his side from the moment he had plucked it from Abrigor, and had turned out to be far more trouble than it was worth.

It was a bizarre anomaly that Hedrenatherax did not pretend to understand. Instead of coming to the Abyss bereft of memory or identity, this petitioner had somehow retained all of its knowledge and power as a mortal master of sorcery. In addition, it had learned to absorb the life essence of demons, thereby affecting its own transformation into an Abyssal creature. The petitioner had managed to escape Gemnez Drak, dealing Hedrenatherax a humiliating defeat in the process. Still a balor rather than a demon lord in

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those days, forced to serve Pyrak, Hedrenatherax had no choice but to hunt it down, an ordeal that had resulted in yet another painful confrontation. Hedrenatherax had at last recaptured the strange petitioner and returned it to Gemnez Drak, where the great devil Gemnez had sought to divine the secrets of the former archmage's bizarre existence.

Hedrenatherax had stormed into Gemnez Drak a few days after his ascension, seeking the faithless petitioner, which called itself Hazergal. It had recently assumed the shape of a babau, and the newly risen demon lord had demanded that every babau within Gemnez Drak present itself before him. But Gemnez had made all of that unnecessary, presenting the soul-shackled creature for the new demon lord to do with as he wished. Hedrenatherax had torn the babau that was Hazergal to pieces, devouring each ichor soaked chunk with great satisfaction, reveling in the knowledge that his burgeoning empire would be free of such meddling influences. He was the Lord of Vrack now, and none who opposed him would be spared.

"Vrack" was an Abyssal word, meanly simply "flat." The entire plane, one of the myriad levels of the Abyss, lived up to the name the fallen Pyrak had given it. It was a wind-scorched desolation, broken only by looming mountains to the south. Hedrenatherax had controlled the plane itself and its demonic population, which owed him fealty at least in name, if not in deed.

It was the plight of the new demon lord to rally his demonic vassals to his side, forge them into a cohesive army, and protect himself from the predations of more established archfiends. Hedrenatherax had been able to convince many demons to serve him, mainly through promises of glory, or outright threats. The only demons that had refused to join the new demon lord's cause had been Pyrak's wing of elite vrocks, a deadly and experienced group called the Dreadwings. Although this small army of elite demons had not aided their former master during Hedrenatherax's usurpation, they showed their loyalty to Pyrak posthumously by defecting to the service of another demon lord following Hedrenatherax's ascension.

Pazuzu had been more than happy to accept the Dreadwings into his service, a fact that angered Hedrenatherax to no end. He could do nothing to prevent the Dreadwings from defecting, and was forced to sit idly by while their treason strengthened one of his many rivals.

Hedrenatherax had an army, but it was composed of lesser demons, and completely fractured and leaderless. The new demon lord had no generals,

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no loyal right hand to enact his will, no one to rally his forces when the need arose. He had attempted to promote a few of the more promising demons from the rank and file, including a rather thick headed nalfashnee and a marilith whose hunger for power rivaled that of Hedrenatherax himself. He had slain the nalfeshnee for incompetence, and the marilith for attempting to take the throne of Vrack for her own. The first had fallen before the massive, scythe-like protuberance of bone that formed his right arm; the second died upon the barbed end of *Dreadskewer*, the awful spear that had slain Pyrak. Hedrenatherax had retained the weapon, and often wielded is as a symbol of his authority. It was said that *Dreadskewer* had been forged by the Infernals to slay demons, and its very touch was painful to demon-kind, a trait that Hedrenatherax circumvented by use of a glove sewn from the hide of a barbazu devil.

After the death of the marilith, Hedrenatherax had decided that his rule would be one of his own devising. It was plain he could not trust any of the demons that inhabited his domain to do anything but attempt to usurp him. Pressure was the only constant of his ascension, pressure to rule, pressure to rally his demons. And if he did not endure these pressures, there were literally dozens of other demon lords who would gladly swoop in and crush him.

Orcus and Azazel were Hedrenatherax's most immediate concerns. He had already fought a number of skirmishes with the demon prince of undead, and for now that was all Orcus seemed willing to do. But Hedrenatherax had no doubt that the ram headed fiend was simply testing his defenses, biding his time for a more direct assault. Azazel on the other hand, was far subtler in his advances. The charismatic demon lord had sent a number of delegations to Hedrax, proposing all manner of alliances, all of which had Hedrenatherax serving as a subordinate vassal. Hedrenatherax had sent the demons in each of these delegations back to their lord – in pieces.

The list of challenges and difficulties facing Hedrenatherax's rule was growing daily, while the sum of his advantages remained stalled at two. His main asset was the vast spawning pit of Gemnez Drak, where he, unlike many demon lords, could create armies of lesser demons. This required the use of vast quantities of larvae, the pathetic worm-like creatures created from the souls of the damned.

Larvae were expensive, however. They could only be obtained from the enigmatic night hags, who kept the secret of their creation from the

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demon lords of the Abyss *and* the archdevils of Infernium. Hedrenatherax had nearly drained his coffers buying up all the larvae he could, and had managed to create a staggering force of lesser demons, literally millions of dretch, manes, and babau. But even in these great numbers, lesser demons would fall like wheat to a scythe to a determined force of greater fiends, and the ranks of Hedrenatherax's army were woefully short of the mightiest of demon-kind. Still, his army had managed to hold off a number of minor incursions from Orcus, winning battles of attrition against the demon prince's undead.

The second bright spot, on what would otherwise be a very dim situation, was that Hedrenatherax had managed to forge a single alliance with another demon lord. Mastiphal was not the most powerful of Abyssal rulers, but he did lay claim to an entire plane, and had ruled for countless millennia. The patron of the hyena-like gnolls, Mastiphal commanded a respectable force of the fiendish dog-men, as well as a host of demons and other infernal creatures. He was also served by a vast horde of ghouls and ghasts, as that particular form of undead considered the demon lord to be their benefactor upon the prime material plane.

Mastiphal had approached Hedrenatherax soon after his ascension, wishing to forge an alliance and combine their resources to repel attacks from other demon lords, as well as conquer more territory. To date the demon lords had done nothing more than hold onto their territory, as Mastiphal's alliance with Hedrenatherax had brought the ire of other, previously unconcerned, demon lords down upon them both. Now, the hounds were closing in for the kill, and both Mastiphal and Hedrenatherax stood to lose their domains to more powerful abyssal rulers.

All of this weighed heavily upon the horned brow of Hedrenatherax as he sat slumped in his throne, his left hand idly fingering the shaft of *Dreadskewer*, which lay across his lap. He awaited more bad news from the lips of Gemnez, the rogue devil that had once served Pyrak. As master of Gemnez Drak, Gemnez oversaw the spawning pits and the creation of Hedrenatherax's army. He was due to give a progress report today. The Lord of Vrack hardly trusted the arrogant devil, but knew that he was far too valuable a recourse to cast aside.

Hedrenatherax stared down the length of his empty throne room, listening for the telltale pounding of Gemnez's massive tread, and wondered how he had failed so spectacularly. He had power, he had an army, he even

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had an entire plane, but his ascension had been nothing like the raw and brutal dreams he had entertained as a balor. His status as a demon lord had become more a burden than anything else. Despite this, he would rather have been destroyed than be anything less than what he was.

Casting a look back over his shoulder, at the withered corpse of Pyrak, the usurper muttered, "How did you do it, you feathered bastard? How did you keep it all together?"

Regardless of who had emerged the victor in their final confrontation, Hedrenatherax could not deny that Pyrak had ruled his domain in splendid fashion. He held other demon lords at bay with paltry ease, using the insubstantial weapon of diplomacy rather than violence to preserve his rule, Although Pyrak's battle prowess had certainly not gone unnoticed by any would-be enemies.

Not once could Hedrenatherax remember a single incursion into Pyrak's domain. Not even the likes of Orcus or Azazel had dared challenge the mighty vrock. In addition, Pyrak had managed to win almost unimaginable victories in Infernium, destroying great armies of devils and even slaying an archdevil. *But that last trick sealed your fate, didn't it, Pyrak?* Hedrenatherax thought as he stroked the lusterless gray metal of *Dreadskewer*. Pyrak's victory over Beyemon had weakened him, and the trophy he had brought back to the Abyss, the great devil's spear, had been the very instrument of his destruction.

Hedrenatherax grinned wide, exposing more of his jutting, yellowed tusks. The thought of his former master – pierced and dying on the floor of his own throne room – always brought a faint whiff of the ecstasy he had felt on the day when his dreams, however unlikely, had been realized. The smile faded from the new lord's horrendous features as quickly as it had come, snatched from his face by the empty reality of the present. If he did not divine a way to strengthen his domain, then he would join Pyrak as a grim trophy, nailed to the walls of another demon lord's throne room.

The room suddenly resounded with the dull thud of a heavy fist pounding upon the room's only door. Hedrenatherax looked up from the dire melancholy that was slowly consuming him and barked, "Come!"

The great iron door swung open to emit the ponderous from of Gemnez. The sight of the rogue horned devil always churned Hedrenatherax's stomach, and his disdain for the bloated fiend was impossible to hide. "I hope you have brought me better news than I have had of late, toad. My

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patience for ill tidings has grown thin." Hedrenatherax spat as Gemnez neared the throne.

Gemnez dropped to a knee before his master; an act that Hedrenatherax knew wounded the devil's pride each time he did it. Gemnez had always been Hedrenatherax's superior, in both mind and body, easily defeating the former balor in their two confrontations. But now things were different; Hedrenatherax's ascension to demon lord had sharpened his mind, and greatly increased his physical prowess. No longer did the subtleties of Gemnez's clever barbs elude him, nor did he fear the infernal for his size and skill at arms. Gemnez had accepted this subordinate role with no complaint, a fact that only sharpened the edge of Hedrenatherax's suspicion.

"I fear that we are running out of larvae, my lord. The spawning pits will run dry in a few days." Gemnez said after rising to meet the steel gaze of his liege.

Hedrenatherax said nothing, regarding Gemnez with a cool malevolent glare. Gemnez, as if sensing the rage building within the demon lord, quickly addressed the bad news he had laid at his lord's feet. "But, my lord, if I may offer some council in this matter."

"Oh, yes, fat one, please enlighten me with your wisdom," Hedrenatherax grated through clenched teeth, his gloved left hand tightening on the shaft of *Dreadskewer*.

Gemnez smiled, spreading his fat, crimson-stained lips across his wide reptilian face. "My lord flatters me with his generosity," the devil said, knowing that he could occasionally indulge in a bit of sarcasm and not be murdered for it. "I have recently heard that the plane of Gehenna is about to erupt in civil war, and that it would be a most opportune time to strike up alliances with certain involved parties."

"How have you come to know this, Gemnez? And more to the point, how does this concern me or your inability to provide me with new demons?" Hedrenatherax asked, his patience already wearing thin.

"My lord, I have an extensive network of spies and informants placed across the multiverse, which supply me with all manner of interesting tidbits that I, of course, pass on to you."

"Yes, I'm sure that you do." Hedrenatherax said, making no attempt to hide his disbelief. "But you still have not explained how a civil war in Gehenna benefits me."

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"Yes, my lord, of course." Gemnez purred. "Have you heard the tale of Yaghur Hod?"

"The prisoner of Elysium?" Hedrenatherax replied. "Of course, it is a commonly known legend."

The tale of Yaghur Hod was an ancient one, and one that had been told and retold so many times that many doubted its validity. The legend stated that Yaghur Hod had been the first of the Archodaemons, the grand ruler of the mercenary breed of fiends, and had held power in a time long before the rise of devil and demon. Some even said that Yaghur Hod's reign predated the rise of chaos and law.

A unique creature of singular power, Yaghur Hod had commanded an army of his brethren that was said to be without number. In this ancient time beyond mortal reckoning, he had waged war not on his fellow fiends, but on the vaunted planes of Elysium, wherein dwell the purest of all celestials. Yaghur Hod had eventually been defeated by the mighty leonal, Auraliach, who in single combat had struck down the Archodaemon, and imprisoned him for all eternity on the second layer of Elysium.

"Well, he has been freed," Gemnez said.

"The prisoner of Elysium, freed?" Hedrenatherax exclaimed. "How did this happen?" It was an impossible event, for Yaghur Hod was imprisoned where no fiend could travel. And even if that were possible, it would take an army like no other to storm the gates of Elysium.

"It is unknown, but his freedom is a fact, and he is most eager to reclaim his title and power from the current Archodaemon," Gemnez said, smiling, the fiendish gleam of a well-laid plan burning in his beady reptilian eyes. "I am sure that he would be most receptive to the aid of a mighty demon lord, and would be more than grateful if such aid would help him win back his kingdom."

Hedrenatherax had to admit the idea had merit. He had used daemonic mercenaries in the past, and although their loyalty was highly dubious, they could be potent allies. If Yaghur Hod were to become Archodaemon once again, then he would command the allegiance of every daemon and could command an army that was beyond counting. "Can you contact Yaghur Hod, toad? Or are you merely suggesting this plan of action to cover for you failure at the spawning pit?"

"My lord, you wound me," Gemnez said, pretending to be insulted by Hedrenatherax's obvious suspicion. "I would not bring before my lord

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anything that would not ultimately serve him, and in this matter I assure you I can deliver."

"Very well, fat one. I will meet with Yaghur Hod and discuss a union of our two forces." Hedrenatherax delivered his edict with stoic calm, but inside he was near bursting with relief and joy. With Yaghur Hod as an ally he could repulse his demonic rivals and perhaps even wage a war of conquest upon them.

"Then I shall make haste to Gemnez Drak and arrange it." Gemnez said with a bow. "I hope I have pleased my lord."

"Hah!" Hedrenatherax snorted. "Pleased me? Well, toad, I have decided not to kill you, if that answers your question."

"It is enough, my liege," Gemnez said, smiling broadly. "I will take my leave."

"Yes, get out of my sight before I change my mind," Hedrenatherax said, pointing *Dreadskewer* towards the door to the throne room.

After Gemnez left, Hedrenatherax rose from his throne and turned to look at the corpse of Pyrak hanging above his seat of power. "Well, Pyrak, it seems that you shall hold your place of honor for a while longer," he said, drinking in the view of his defeated enemy, and letting his unbridled dreams of conquest wash over him like a sea of blood.

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As Hazergal looked down onto a jagged landscape of craggy towers and soaring peaks, he felt his breath catching in his throat. It was a sight that few mortals had ever dreamed of. Was he the first demon, he wondered, who had ever beheld the cloud-capped spires of the Abyssal plane of Pazunia and felt such awe?

The world beneath him fell away in a ragged network of stony quills in all directions, the ground barely even visible thousands of feet below, nestled in sheer chasms and deep pits between the thrusting teeth of endless mountains.. Yes, Hazergal realized, he was the first demon who had ever known such emotions—the more so because he had not always *been* a demon. Once, he had been a man.

Much had changed since his exile to the Abyss, but for Hazergal there was no change so great or so welcome as the wings that now flared from his back. He had become enthralled with intricacies of flight, reveling in the screaming wind against his body and the fierce rhythm of his own beating wings. As a man, he had mastered many potent sorceries, quite a few of which had permitted him the power of flight. But such paltry magical attempts at aerial grace paled in comparison to soaring under the strength of one's own wings.

He was by no means an experienced flyer—in fact, he was clumsy in the extreme compared to the other winged demons he had seen—yet he thrilled at an experience that other Abyssal creatures most likely found as mundane as eating or breathing. Like the vista that unfolded beneath him, it took a mind that had once been mortal to appreciate such things.

The wind howled around Hazergal's flying form in a banshee shriek, whipping through the narrow spaces in ceaseless gales of hurricane strength, shaking the foundations of each treacherous summit and casting down the weakest to thunderous ruin far below. Two glaring suns bathed all in a visceral red light. The murky illumination seeped down through the heavy cloud cover, painting the spires of stone and obsidian in this gaudy shade of scarlet, giving them the appearance of great blunt knives wet with newly spilled blood.

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He was not alone in the skies. In this plane, the air was crowded with life. Great flocks of winged demons and other airborne horrors alighted from peak to peak, nesting in aeries carved into mountain spires, or simply riding the turbulent eddies of the gnashing wind, forsaking any firmament. To Hazergal, this jumbled and broken landscape had become a sanctuary, and even before he had come here, the once human wizard had seen his body reshape itself to match his new home perfectly.

Hazergal was climbing the evolutionary ladder of demon-kind. Once, he had been a lowly dretch. Then he had become the more powerful sort of demon known as a babau. Now, he ascended even higher, transforming from earth-bound babau to wind-riding vrock.

All his mortal life, Hazergal's source of power had been his mind. Through the study of magic, he had forged his natural cunning into a weapon against all enemies, a reservoir of arcane might. Death, mysteriously, had not diminished this. But now, Hazergal knew a different power. It was not locked away in his thoughts, but viscerally present in the raw strength of his new body. The forms of lesser demons had not prepared Hazergal for the sheer destructive potential he knew in the flesh of a vrock.

As a vrock, he stood nearly eleven feet in height. Every inch of his body was covered in dull gray feathers, each quill stiff and knife edged. His hands, although still deft, had gnarled into powerful bird-like talons, as had his feet, and when on land he gripped the earth with indefatigable strength. His hawk-like head was proudly equipped with a great beak, sharp as a well-honed blade but nimble enough for the intricacies of speech. And above all, of course, there were the wings.

Hazergal landed upon on one of the few places in Pazunia a large number of creatures could gather while not in flight. One of the massive stone peaks had been shorn off at some point to create a flat mesa-like top some two hundred yards in diameter. The crude platform held a single structure, a tall tower of yellow stone that thrust like a jaundiced finger into the dim red light of an Abyssal morning. It was here he had been told to meet his newest benefactor, the ancient and volatile demon lord Pazuzu, to whom the bleak realm of Pazunia belonged.

This meeting had, of course, been devised by Hazergal's only ally in the Abyss, the rogue devil Gemnez. Since their first meeting, this grotesquely rotund fiend had diligently sought a place to hide Hazergal from the growing suspicions of Hedrenatherax. The newly crowned demon lord

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believed the former arch-wizard to be dead, having been duped into destroying an ordinary babau demon in his stead. This too had been the work of Gemnez, and although the ruse was simple, it was more than enough to fool the dull mind of one such as Hedrenatherax.

But even a slow-witted demon lord could not be deceived forever, and he did not trust Gemnez in the least. He suspected the rogue devil's every action, and though his perpetual attempts to winnow the truth from the devil were ham-fisted, they were determined and seemingly inexhaustible. So Gemnez had chosen to hide Hazergal until more of his unique situation could be understood.

The choice of Pazunia as a refuge for the former arch-mage had seemed odd to Hazergal at first. The demon lord Pazuzu, was renowned for his cleverness and two-faced ambition. He styled himself a prince among demons and claimed not only Pazunia, but the skies above all the myriad planes of the Abyss. According to Gemnez, Pazuzu had been thrilled with the idea, claiming to be intrigued with Hazergal's bizarre ascension through the demonic ranks. The demon lord had offered Hazergal sanctuary, although he had not yet named a price for his hospitality. That price was almost certainly the facet of the agreement that Hazergal would be discussing in the impending meeting.

He had tried to guess at what Pazuzu's motivations might be, but attempting to second-guess a creature whose guile and resources were legendary – even among demon lords – had proved a fruitless venture. What little he knew of Pazuzu's history offered no clue to what the demon prince might be up to, except for one nagging bit of Abyssal trivia that Gemnez had related to him.

The rogue devil had revealed that the domain of Vrack, now usurped by Hedrenatherax, had once belonged to Pazuzu, in an age so long gone that few remembered it. Hedrenatherax's predecessor, Pyrak, had served Pazuzu in his lordship of Vrack, acting as the demon prince's most able lieutenant. But Pyrak had been unsatisfied with his servitude, and had raised a great host of his vrock brethren in a bid to overthrow his lord and claim Vrack for himself. In the end, it had come down to single bloody confrontation between Pyrak and Pazuzu, the outcome of which left Hazergal's current host severely wounded and forever exiled from his former dominion. In the millennia that had passed between this uprising and the death of his usurper, Pazuzu had once again risen to his former glory. However, in all

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that time, he had not once attempted to strike back at Pyrak. And now that vengeance was beyond even Pazuzu's reach, thanks to the murderous Hedrenatherax.

Hazergal had surmised that Pazuzu's interest in him had nothing to do with his lost domain. Pyrak was now dead, and according to Gemnez, Hedrenatherax would easily fall to the demon prince's armies if he chose to reclaim his former territory. Beyond this small bit of reckoning, Hazergal had deduced nothing. He could only take Pazuzu at his word, a very dangerous proposition when one was dealing with demon lords. But Gemnez had assured him that all would be explained today, and despite his own misgivings about the rogue infernal and his motivations, Hazergal found that he trusted the exiled devil.

The skies were clear over Hazergal's mesa, although a multitude of demons, gargoyles, perytons, and other winged horrors perched upon the ramparts of the spindly tower. It was one of Pazuzu's many fortresses in Pazunia. He knew little of the place, only that it was known as Kyn-Lorath, and that it was a stronghold rarely visited by the demon prince.

Some instinct of Hazergal's demonic body drew his gaze to the west, and there he spotted a number of tiny black shapes hovering just over the horizon. As he watched, the shapes took on substance and form, and his inhumanly acute eyes were able to discern the definite outline of five figures. Four of the shapes dwarfed the fifth, and as they neared the mesa and the tower, Hazergal saw that his host had arrived.

Four demons and one fat devil landed softly at the base of the tower. The devil, of course, was Gemnez, who touched down with a grace that belied his familiar bulk.

Of the demons, three were of a kind Hazergal had never seen before. But he had heard that Pazuzu was served by a rare and mysterious breed of fiends known as the anzu. These demons could only be those shadowy servitors of the demon prince. The anzu were massive, the size of elephants, and were covered in a greasy black plumes, their heavy bodies supported by thick legs ending in taloned bird-like feet. For aerial locomotion the anzu were equipped with four mammoth wings, large enough to lift such a ponderous body into the air. He could see the anzu were not stupid beasts,. At the end of their long serpentine necks were grim lion-like visages, each burning with fell intelligence and awful malice.

The fourth demon, almost unimpressive when compared to his anzu

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guardians, was Pazuzu himself. He strode purposefully towards Hazergal, followed by the giant, gaudy form of Gemnez. Unlike many demon lords, who attained the size of giants, Pazuzu stood only six feet in height, his robust frame no more impressive than that of a large human. He was, however, most certainly *not* human. His abyssal origin was quite evident in his grim demonic visage, four powerful wings, and sturdy talons at his hands and feet.

Pazuzu's face, although compelling, was terribly bestial, combining the features of a man with that of a large hunting bird such as a hawk or eagle. A spiky nest of stiff feathers, blood red in hue, crowned the archfiend's head, jutting straight up out over his high noble brow. Hazergal had seen enough of fiends that the juxtaposition of features common to residents of the Abyss could no longer disturb him—or so he had thought. Now, he found himself staring, unable to tear his gaze away from Pazuzu's eyes.

Those eyes were like no other Hazergal had seen. They would've belonged on an angel's face, perhaps, but not a demon's. An icy shade of blue, the eyes seemed alive with something like amusement, or even humor. They were bright and vividly expressive, almost enough to create the illusion of kindness in the face of the demon lord. They served as an onlooker's only refuge in an incarnate form of pure evil and chaos.

As Pazuzu approached, Hazergal noticed a wispy vapor of black smoke around the demon lord. It clung to him as if it were a shroud, seeming to emanate from his wings and follow him like a gauzy cloak. The archfiend bore a smile upon his lipless yet completely emotive beak-like mouth, and his eyes twinkled merrily, as if he were about to relate a particularly bawdy tale or on off-color joke.

Behind Pazuzu lingered Gemnez, his rotund body girded with layers of sloppy fat. His wet, beady eyes—missing nothing and noting everything—beamed out over the absurd rouge on his cheeks and his flamboyant red lip paint. Behind Gemnez, the anzu came warily and stalking. They followed close behind their master, bodies tense, quite ready to leap forward and tear to pieces any enemy Pazuzu might encounter.

"Lord Pazuzu," Hazergal named his host, and bowed when the archfiend finally stood before him.

"Well, you're a proper sort, aren't you, Hazergal?" Pazuzu said with a chuckle. "That's the first time I've seen a vrock bow to anything. I usually have to cut their legs off at the knees to get them to grovel so low."

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Hazergal straightened, and looked down upon benefactor who stood only half as tall as he did. "I meant no offense, I only wished to offer my respect to one whose hospitality I have come to enjoy."

"'Hospitality', he says." Pazuzu looked back over his shoulder at Gemnez, still smiling. "Well, it's certainly obvious our friend here was a mortal in the not too distance past."

Pazuzu looked back at Hazergal, his eyes suddenly losing their luster, becoming cold and hard. "You will soon learn that there is no hospitality in the Abyss, nor mercy, nor loyalty. In fact, none of the paltry contrivances you mortals have concocted to assuage you fears about the *true* nature of the multiverse exist here. Here there is only advantage and disadvantage."

"I see," Hazergal said. "And which am I? Advantage or disadvantage?"

"That remains to be seen," Pazuzu replied, the smile falling from his face and leaving only a hard slash. "Perhaps you can offer me something I can use, something that will allow me to gain advantage, or perhaps yon anzu will tear you into ribbons and feast on your guts." The anzu behind Pazuzu growled restlessly, obviously hoping for just such an occurrence.

Now Hazergal sighed, raising an eyebrow, and his demeanor changed as he spoke. "Very well, Lord Pazuzu. This is what I have come to expect from your ilk—blustering and bullying. Not one of you so called demon 'lords' has shown the slightest hint of any true nobility, yet alone the wisdom to discern your own foolishness."

"Foolishness?" Pazuzu hissed An acidic vapor leaked from between his jaws with his breath. "For countless millennia have I survived the machinations of this damnable plane, and I have done so by avoiding any and all 'foolishness.' In fact, your presence in Pazunia is due only to the fact that your fat friend there—" Pazuzu cast a glance over his shoulder at Gemnez— "is quite adept at making foolishness seem like perfect sense."

"You are too kind, my prince," Gemnez purred, stepping between Hazergal and Pazuzu, his feminine whisper made even more absurd coming from his great reptilian lips. "I know that the three of us can certainly enter into a mutually beneficial agreement that will give each of us exactly what we want."

"And what do I want, fat one?" Pazuzu asked flippantly, not really expecting a reply, but something in Hazergal's mind thrummed, like the tumblers in a lock suddenly clicking into place, and he knew what the demon lord desired.

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"You want the sword," Hazergal said. "You want *Fiendbleeder*." His tone was calm, almost an accusation.

Pazuzu's eyes narrowed, but his smile returned, a knife-bladed smirk that confirmed all Hazergal had heard about the demon lord's notoriously capricious nature. "And why would I want such a trinket? I have hundreds of enchanted blades."

"Not like *Fiendbleeder*," Hazergal said. "The sword is unique. Powerful enough to tempt even one such as you."

Hazergal had learned much about *Fiendbleeder* in his time on Pazunia. Gemnez had taught him, for he believed that the sentient sword had much to do with Pyrak's death and the fate of Hazergal himself. Gemnez had also deduced that *Fiendbleeder* had dominated Pyrak's mind for much of the fallen lord's reign, its powerful will pushing him to endless warfare against the devils it had been forged to destroy.

"He is quick, this one." Pazuzu grinned, seemingly unperturbed at the discovery of his aims. "Yes, I want the sword, but not for what you might think."

"You can't control it," Hazergal said flatly. "It consumed Pyrak and he was mightier than you."

"Mightier, maybe," Pazuzu conceded. "Smarter, definitely not. As evidenced by his recent death at the hands of that ingrate Hedrenatherax."

"Then for what purpose do you require the sword?" Hazergal asked.

"Simple," Pazuzu replied. "Vengeance."

"Vengeance? Against whom?"

"Against *Fiendbleeder* itself!" Pazuzu eyes suddenly flashed, and Hazergal could see utter seriousness and gravity behind his gaze.

"You want to take vengeance on a sword?" Hazergal was incredulous, even mocking, although Pazuzu did not seem to notice.

"It is not an entirely ridiculous notion," Gemnez spoke up. "The sword is possessed of considerable intellect and free will, and has been instrumental in the downfall of several demon lords in its long and storied history. I would suspect that Lord Pazuzu is not the only demon in the Abyss that would like to see *Fiendbleeder* destroyed."

"So you mean to destroy it then?" Hazergal asked. He was still astounded by the absurdity of it. The entire notion of vengeance on an inanimate object, even one such as *Fiendbleeder*, made no sense to him at all.

Pazuzu slowly sank to his haunches, idly scratching at the ground with

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one taloned finger. "Yes, I mean to destroy *Fiendbleeder*, but not before I've drowned the gods-be-damned blade in pit fiend piss and archon tears, to assuage some of the debt it owes to me." There was real rancor in the demon lord's voice. All guile and misdirection had been abandoned, and Pazuzu spoke as one obsessed.

Hazergal could only stare. How had this demon lord survived so long, possessed of such lunacy? "You're talking about torture. You mean to torture a sword?"

Pazuzu looked up at Hazergal, his eyes suddenly smoldering with terrible wrath. "It is not just a sword, my naïve little *worm*," the demon lord spat, a subtle viciousness creeping into his tone. "It is an entity possessed of a dark and cunning intellect and a will that is nigh unstoppable by mortal and immortal alike."

Pazuzu stood, brought his taloned hands to his chest and ripped open the leather tunic he wore to reveal a livid scar that ran the length of his muscular torso. "Do you see this?"

Hazergal nodded. The scar was outlined in cracked black flesh, which ran with yellow pus. It had to be causing the demon lord a considerable amount of pain.

"For eight thousand years I have lived with this… affliction. This corruption of my flesh. A result of the one and only time anyone, or anything, has managed to lay arms upon me." Pazuzu seethed, his rage had become a physical entity, a palpable presence that cause Gemnez and the anzu to shrink back, although Hazergal held his ground.

"Pyrak did that to you?"

"NO!" Pazuzu suddenly shouted, tearing at the remains of his leather tunic like a mad man. "No! That lice-ridden fool would never have been able to challenge me himself. It was *Fiendbleeder*. It was the sword, only the sword that drove Pyrak to his coup, and gave him the strength to dethrone me."

It made perfect sense. Pyrak had been Pazuzu's able lieutenant, marshaling the demon lord's armies while the prince of demons still maintained the plains of Vrack. Pyrak's overthrow of Pazuzu had been unforeseen by all, including Pazuzu himself, and the great vrock had caught his former master off guard and unaware. Where and how Pyrak had found Fiendbleeder was a mystery, but there was little doubt that the sword had been the sole reason for the usurper's success. And now, with

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Pyrak dead, Pazuzu had but one vessel for his rage, one outlet for the pain he had suffered these long millennia.

"Lord Pazuzu, what do I have to do with all of this? How can I help you claim this vengeance?" Hazergal asked, already suspecting the answer.

Pazuzu's demeanor suddenly changed, the rage left him as suddenly as it had appeared. His eyes once again shown with volatile mirth. "I shall need you to fetch the sword for me," he said simply. "And in exchange, I will continue to provide you with my patronage and the safety of my domain."

"The details of this arrangement have yet to be worked out, Hazergal," Gemnez said, stepping forward now that the storm of Pazuzu's ire had passed. "Although I have set certain elements into motion that will make this task far easier."

"I imagine you have," Hazergal replied, knowing that Gemnez had likely been busy in Hedrenatherax's domain.

"Yes, many details. Many, many details…" Pazuzu said, smiling balefully. "But I promise you Hazergal, do this for me, and you shall win my favor, a powerful boon upon this plane.'

"I am sure," Hazergal said, not attempting to hide the doubt now seething in the pit of his stomach.

"Good. Then let me offer you the use of Kyn-Lorath while you dwell upon Pazunia." Pazuzu said, waiving a hand towards the stone tower that dominated the mesa. "Now come, there is much to discuss."

Hazergal sighed deeply and followed Pazuzu, Gemnez, and the anzu towards Kyn-Lorath. His mind was afire with the possibilities of this new development, but he was unable to quash the feeling that he had stepped from the proverbial frying pan and firmly into the fire.

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It cannot be said that Hedrenatherax was easily impressed. In his dozen or so millennia dwelling in the endless chaos and despair of the Abyss, especially during his years as the major domo to the fallen demon lord Pyrak, he had beheld mind-boggling sights. He had seen things that would make even a hardened demon – now *demon lord* – quake with apprehension or even outright fear.

Such things were the stock and trade of the Abyss: horror, death, and chaos. And they were not without their majesty. For who could deny the grandeur of Ungorth Reddik, the boggy fortress of the great Demogorgon? Or the opulent jewel of misery that was Azazel's plane-spanning metropolis of Ezkaros? Or even Hedrenatherax's own wind-scorched Vrack, the Abyssal layer of eternal plains? All these things could captivate even the most stoic soul.

But each and every one of those sights diminished in comparison to the sheer immensity of the edifice Hedrenatherax looked upon now.

Like a great iron tooth, the tower of Har'Drok spiraled impossibly high into the murky skies of Hades, casting a shadow so massive it blotted out the thick gloom of the gray waste itself. Formerly the seat of daemonic power, the tower had been abandoned when Yaghur Hod was first imprisoned in Elysium, eons and eons ago. The ruling seat of Hades had then been moved to Kyn'Drok, the bone tower, where the current Archodaemon ruled.

Hedrenatherax's bestial face creased in a tusked grin as he imagined what a frantic state the daemon prince Ozynthraxus must be in. The demon lord could imagine even *his* featureless visage twitching in consternation at the news of Yaghur Hod's return.

The quiet of Hedrenatherax's reverie did not last long. "Are we to wait outside like beggars?!" the Lord of Vrack spat over his shoulder at the hulking shape of Gemnez, his recently promoted horned devil major domo. The rogue devil waddled up close to his lord, his rouge-painted cheeks made drab by the unholy gloom of Hades.

"I am certain that Yaghur Hod knows that we have arrived, my lord," Gemnez whispered, his voice a sibilant hiss ill-fitting his immense body,

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scaled skin, and wide fanged mouth. "He most likely views us from the comfort of his throne room, sizing up our… your worthiness an ally. Would you not do the same, my lord?"

Hedrenatherax hawked and spat a great glob of sticky red phlegm in reply. He marched up to the cyclopean doors of Har'Drok, drawing *Dreadskewer* from the sheath across his back as he approached. The demon lord handled the great enchanted spear with his left hand; his right had had been transformed into a meter-long scythe of bone during his ascension from balor to archfiend. As always, his devil-skin glove allowed him to handle *Dreadskewer*—a weapon designed by devils to slay demons—without danger.

"My lord, perhaps it is best we wait until…" Gemnez was cut off in mid-sentence at the ear-shattering clangor of *Dreadskewer's* ironclad butt being driven into the gates of Har'Drok smartly, once, twice, and thrice.

The silence that followed Hedrenatherax brash announcement was cavernous and complete. The demon lord took a step back in spite of himself. Flustered by the lack of attention shown by his host, he felt the chaotic storm of his anger begin to rise. But, if Hedrenatherax had learned anything from his predecessor, it was that senseless rage, was just that: senseless. With palpable effort, he managed to choke his ire down.

Hedrenatherax knew he needed Yaghur Hod. The new demon lord lacked both his predecessor's influence and physical might (although not by much on the second account). He had little hope of driving off threatening demon princes like Orcus and Azazel, who made it no secret that they coveted the windswept plains of Vrack. Yaghur Hod's own rather desperate situation afforded Hedrenatherax an opportunity that could not be overlooked, no matter how much the notion of dependence might have wounded the demon lord's pride.

Newly released from his imprisonment in Elysium by an unknown benefactor—or perhaps even his own hand—Yaghur Hod could only have one goal in mind: the restoration of his dominion over all daemon-kind. Not the flimsy lip-service that daemons paid to the current Archodaemon, as they went about their business of corruption and mercenary extortion, but the true worship and solid allegiance commanded by the Archodaemons of old, first among them Yaghur Hod himself.

Yaghur Hod must be furious at the idea of having to ally with me, an upstart, a usurper, Hedrenatherax thought, and his own anger cooled at the

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knowledge that he was not the only one confronting the truth of his own impotence.

Hedrenatherax was about to rap the doors of Har'Drok once more with the butt of *Dreadskewer*, when, suddenly, the whole tower shook with a thick grating rumble. The massive aperture swung open.

His gloved left hand clenching the haft of *Dreadskewer* tightly, the Lord of Vrack fell back to stand beside Gemnez. Darkness so thick that it seemed to have its own substance flowed out from the open doors of Har'Drok, a thick soup of shadow that made even the perpetual gloom of Hades seem bright. Both demon lord and devil squinted into the inky black, and both were surprised to find that their vision, normally unimpeded by darkness of any kind, was unable to pierce the gloom.

Hedrenatherax glared at Gemnez, who met his lord's ire with a gaudy red-lipped grin. "What is this Gemnez?" the towering demon lord hissed. "I came here to talk alliance, not to be delayed by this mummers' farce." Hedrenatherax pointed his scythe-arm at the coalescing blackness that still poured forth through the doors.

"Yaghur Hod is an ancient and powerful fiend, my lord," Gemnez said. "Such pomp and ceremony may be very important to him. I suggest we indulge him."

Hedrenatherax was about to loose a torrent of obscenity—with particular emphasis on what *he* thought about Yaghur Hod's "pomp and ceremony"—when a hunched figure abruptly ambled out of the blackness. The demon lord sucked in a breath, the air whistling past his tusks in a disgusted shriek. "This is what he greets us with?" he shouted. "*This!?*"

Most fiends had little respect for night hags, the loathsome race of planar merchants that dealt exclusively on the souls of the damned. The tattered form of the night hag that shuffled from the darkness of Har'Drok's interior was not a sterling example of her race, a fact that only added to Hedrenatherax's outrage. Like most night hags, Yaghur Hod's herald was tall and emaciated with warty, gray-blue skin and a visage so foul it could make an otyugh flinch.

"My master sends his apologies for not greeting you himself," the hag croaked, her voice a sepulcher grate. "But he is unable to leave the safety of Har'Drok for the moment."

Hedrenatherax stomped up to the hag, his twenty feet towering over the wretched herald and smothering her in his own twisted shadow. "What

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does your master fear, wretch?" the demon lord hissed menacingly.

The hag looked up at the seething Hedrenatherax, her face passive but tinged with irritation and disgust. "Yaghur Hod has many enemies, my lord. I would expect you to understand my master's circumstances, beleaguered as you are, and begging at his door"

The hag's words smote Hedrenatherax's ears with a ringing bite. The very sound of the word "beggar" threatened to drive him firmly over the edge of homicidal fury. His left hand clenched around the haft of *Dreadskewer* and his mind suddenly filled with the most delectable images of Yaghur Hod's night hag servant, writhing impaled and gasping on the weapon's end. Such an event surely would have transpired, if not for Gemnez.

Sensing the impending disaster that was about to unfold, Gemnez managed to slide his awesome bulk in between Hedrenatherax and the night hag. "My lady, please forgive my lord's ire, he is under much strain and means no disrespect to you or your great master." The devil's voice dropped an octave, a sultry purr that calmed even the seething rage of Hedrenatherax.

Hedrenatherax drew in a deep ragged breath, and again forced his natural fury down. "Yes, much strain," the demon lord whispered through clenched teeth. "Please…forgive my brusqueness." The demon lord's feeble words of appeasement died on the thin Hades air, so alien were they to his tongue, but they had the desired effect.

Mollified for the moment, the hag rewarded both demon and devil with a wide smile, ghastly enough to make the air shimmer in front of her face. "This way my lords, my master has much to say to you." The hag turned, beckoning Hedrenatherax and Gemnez to follow with a wave of one bony hand.

"Into the lion's den, my lord," Gemnez said ruefully, and held out one flabby arm, motioning for Hedrenatherax to precede him. The demon lord simply scowled at his major domo and stalked into the enveloping darkness of Har'Drok, the lurid green glow of *Dreadskewer's* barbed point lighting his way into the blackness.

* * * * *

Yaghur Hod, the first Archodaemon, Scourge of Elysium, stared out over the grim monotony of his former realm. The great daemon wore his own face this day, an almost featureless black oval, empty save for two great luminous eyes. The gloom of Hades rose up like a smothering blanket of

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malaise, a choking, all-encompassing fatigue that drained the life from anyone unfortunate enough to find himself within its gray wastes.

The great daemon stood on the very top of his tower; the long abandoned Har'Drok, clenching the jagged iron of the crenellations with white-knuckled rage. Never had he known such powerlessness, such impotence, as he was experiencing now.

He had lost much of his former power. Once the god-like master of all Hades, now he was barely above the common lords of Hell, or even one of the disorganized mob of Abyssal rulers. Any chance at reclaiming his former seat of power, and removing the upstart Ozynthraxus, would rely more on what aid he could summon, rather than his own personal strength.

Unfortunately, few had responded to the call of the rightful ruler of Hades. Those that did come crawled into his service like whipped dogs, simpering lickspittles likely out of favor with Ozynthraxus and eager to reap whatever gains might be had in the deposed Archodaemon's service. And he was forced to accept them, forced to stoop so low as to accept even the most pathetic planar garbage into his service, and be thankful for it.

How can this be? Yaghur Hod thought. *How can I have fallen so far that not even my enemies consider me a threat any longer?* His imprisonment in Elysium had not ended with an earth-shattering battle as he fought his way to freedom, slaying guardinals by the droves with his terrible scythe or bringing his ancient foe Auriliach to his knees. Rather, the celestials and their rulers had simply forgotten about him, believing his power to have dwindled to a point that he was no longer a threat. Only a single leonal guardian ensured his confinement, and even as he wrung the life from his lone jailor, relishing in the celestial's dying gasps, he felt the terrible weight of inconsequentiality settle upon his shoulders.

He simply did not matter any more.

But one thing remained to Yaghur Hod, one token of his former glory that none but he could wield. The great daemon clutched his scythe, *Blightrazor,* to his chest, letting the weapon's dark whispers fill his mind with fawning assurances and malignant promises. His escape had been made possible by the return of his dread weapon, a task accomplished by one of his most faithful servants. Without it, he would not have been able to thwart even the meager defenses Auriliach had placed to keep him imprisoned.

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He had held *Blightrazor* since the dawn of creation, a weapon forged from the pure darkness of endless night. The scythe was the physical embodiment of the void, the bleak, lightless eternity that waits at the end of time. None but he could master *Blightrazor's* power, and no one but he could master its brothers, two weapons forged by his own hand in a time primeval: the great sword *Fiendbleeder*, and its direct antitheses, the mighty spear called *Dreadskewer.*

Each of these peerless weapons represented one aspect of evil. Each possessed a will to accomplish its aims above all else, and each was imbued with a portion of Yaghur Hod's power. Unfortunately, *Fiendbleeder* and *Dreadskewer* had fallen into the hands of the demons and devils respectively, and were caught up in the pointless civil war between the two. If Yaghur Hod could bring the three weapons together, and reclaim the power within them, then no force in the multiverse would be able to thwart his destiny.

And so the Archodaemon, perceived by his enemies in heaven and hell alike as an impotent fossil, had set into motion an effort to recover both *Fiendbleeder* and *Dreadskewer.* Even now one of the weapons, carried by an oafish demon lord, was being delivered to his very doorstep.

The demon lord, Hedrenatherax, was without a doubt one of the most pathetic abyssal rulers Yaghur Hod had ever laid eyes on. Dull, listless, and possessed of a near debilitating rage, the demon lord was neither wily nor cautious. Luring him to Har'Drok had been far simpler that Yaghur Hod had hoped. The upstart archfiend had usurped rulership of a vast plane of the Abyss, but was unable to adequately defend it. Yaghur Hod's offers of assistance were eagerly accepted by the demon lord's major domo, a rogue devil named Gemnez.

Gemnez, wily as all devils, had offered to assist Yaghur Hod in retrieving *Dreadskewer*, and promised to betray Hedrenatherax. The devil's reasons were unknown, and were beyond even the great daemon's ken, but the fat fiend had lived up to his end of the bargain. He had brought his master to Har'Drok, *Dreadskewer* in hand, as doomed as any petitioner entering the gates of hell.

For his betrayal, Gemnez had asked that he be allowed to rule the planes of Vrack, Hedrenatherax's soon to be vacant seat of power, and that Yaghur Hod provide any military assistance needed to maintain this rule. The former ruler of Hades had agreed to this, but sensed that ruling an Abyssal realm was not the driving force behind the devil's ambition. It

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mattered little; Yaghur Hod had no interest in the Abyss, or who ruled its myriad planes. His eye was on a greater prize.

Once, long ago, he had been on the verge of claiming Elysium for his own. His armies had scourged the celestial paradise, reducing its gleaming towers and vaunted halls into bleak, burning rubble. But foolishly, he had accepted Auriliach's personal challenge, and the great leonal lord, sacrificing much of his own power, had brought Yaghur Hod low, maiming him in the process.

The memory of his defeat drew the great Archodaemon's gaze down to his right leg, which ended at the knee, the legacy of Auriliach's victory over him. The wound defied all attempts by the great daemon to mend his savaged flesh or regenerate his lost limb. He forced to hobble about, leaning on his scythe like a decrepit old man. The wound forced Yaghur Hod to resort to magical flight when he needed to be precise, and he had attained a mastery of aerial combat even creatures born with wings could not surpass..

My day shall come, Auriliach, Yaghur Hod thought. *I shall witness the fields of Amoria razed, the towers of the Blessed City pulled down around your feet. And you, my prince, shall scream your last beneath such torments as would give a demon pause.* The great daemon gripped his scythe, letting the weapon's dark caress fuel his visions of conquest. He lingered there, lost in black fantasies no mortal mind could even entertain, let alone make reality.

"My lord, Hedrenatherax and the traitor are at the foot of the tower." A voice, soft and feminine, pulled the Archodaemon from his reverie.

Yaghur Hod turned towards the speaker, the one creature in all the multiverse that had stayed loyal to him throughout the long years of his imprisonment. Dyzaja was a night hag, a twisted female fiend with deep, bruised-purple skin and a reputation for mercenary and duplicitous temperament. However, Dyzaja's father had been an incubus and her features seemed to vie between achingly beautiful and hideously revolting. A pair of mammoth bat wings, a short whip-like tail, and two small horns that budded from her wide brow further evidenced her demonic heritage. Dyzaja wore a tight-fitting leather vest that left her arms bare, and a pair of long, blousy trousers of crimson silk. A long, elegant rapier hung from a belt on her left hip.

Dyzaja had served her Archodaemon lord for millennia, leading hundreds of other fiends against Yaghur Hod's enemies. The night hag's

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own personal might – garnered from eons of existence – was easily enough to make her an archfiend herself, but she chose to serve rather than rule.

"Ah, my love," Yaghur Hod said, his form blurring and changing to that of a tired, old man with white hair, dressed in long, flowing black robes. Changing shape was only one of the many powers at the great daemon's disposal, and Yaghur Hod had worn thousands of different faces in his long existence. His current form he reserved for Dyzaja, which the night hag found pleasing, perhaps because its apparent vulnerability confirmed her master's trust in her. "Tell me, has the great oaf brought us our prize?"

Dyzaja smiled, her full, red lips splitting to reveal a double row of yellowed fangs. "Truly sire, you had spoken of this demon-lord's foolishness, but I never believed he could be duped so easily. How could one such as he have conquered his own domain?"

Yaghur Hod chuckled. "He is a dim one, is he not? But he serves our purpose. It is his companion, this Gemnez, we must be wary of. There is far more to that one than is apparent."

"I agree, my lord," Dyzaja replied. "They both once served the former master of Vrack, a formidable demon lord. I was truly shocked to find that he was deposed by such a lumbering fool." Dyzaja's voice took on a concerned note. "Perhaps there is more to Hedrenatherax than we first suspected?"

Yaghur Hod hobbled up to the slim night hag and laid a feeble human hand upon one of her sinuous, muscular arms. "Do not worry, my love. He is no threat to us. It was surely *Dreadskewer* and not this Hedrenatherax that laid Pyrak low," he said. "Trust me as you once did. I will not lead us astray."

"Of course, my lord," Dyzaja replied, placing one gnarled, spade-taloned hand over Yaghur Hod's, an oddly affectionate jester that the Archodaemon did not resist. "We will raze the heavens together, my lord, as we once did so long ago. I know this to be true."

Yaghur Hod smiled. "Your words, as always, fill me with strength. For how could I fail with you by my side?" Yaghur Hod's form blurred again, and the great blank-faced fiend stood beside his general once more. "Now come, and let us welcome our guests."

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Hedrenatherax sensed impending betrayal the moment he set foot in Yaghur Hod's audience chamber. He felt it in every cell of his being, scented its ripe stench like flatulence in a closed chamber. The archfiend turned his gaze upon Gemnez, but the rotund devil avoided his master's eyes as they entered Yaghur Hod's presence.

If anything goes awry here, I'll stick that fat slug first, Hedrenatherax thought, savoring the image of Gemnez twitching out his death throes on the end of *Dreadskewer.*

Yaghur Hod stood upon a raised dais in the center of a massive domed chamber, which contained nothing but bone-white walls and a startling array of fiends. The former Archodaemon was a gaunt, faceless fiend with massive, bulbous eyes. The great daemon leaned upon his infamous weapon, the great scythe *Blightrazor*, his face and body language as impassive as bleak Hades itself.

Beside the daemon lord stood a slim feminine form, tiny compared to the massive daemon beside her. The figure was a study in contradictions, simultaneously beautiful and hideous. Her face bore the exquisite features of a sultry goddess marred by pocked skin the color of an angry bruise. Crooked yellow fangs projected beyond her full, sensual lips, and her eyes were a startlingly vivid yellow. The she-fiend's body was graceful, elegant even, although its symmetry was broken by the knots of sinewy muscle that bunched at her shoulders and chorded her arms. Two great wings, leathery and bat-like, flared out from the demoness' back, framing her already menacing form.

"Careful of that one, my lord," Gemnez whispered to Hedrenatherax as they approached the dais, nodding towards the female fiend. "Dyzaja is a fearsome foe. Some say as fearsome as Yaghur Hod himself."

"Hah! That hag-spawn there?" Hedrenatherax spat, accurately assessing Dyzaja's maternal origins. "I've gutted hundreds of her kind. The fact that this one has demon blood, or cowers beneath the banner of Yaghur Hod, does not concern me."

Despite his bravado, the demon lord noted the long, serrated talons

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that capped each finger of Dyzaja's hands, as well as the slim rapier that hung at her side.

How the mighty have fallen, Hedrenatherax thought as he surveyed the motley state of Yaghur Hod's "court". Clustered about their master's dais stood an assortment of fiends and other planar scum. Furtive cryptodaemons, the weakest of daemon-kind, comprised the bulk of Yaghur Hod's minions. Only a single, towering, cacodaemon and a handful of winged azodaemons represented the upper tier of daemonic life. In addition, the former Archodaemon had managed to obtain the services of a small number of common night hags, and a handful of barghests, which crouched at the foot of his dais like a pack of great, mangy dogs.

"How exactly is this pack of dretch feces supposed to aid me?" Hedrenatherax whispered fiercely, pulling Gemnez close with the butt of *Dreadskewer.* "I've never *seen* a more pathetic band of wretches."

"My lord, Yaghur Hod, like you, is attempting to build his empire. Surely you both can come to some common agreement to that end," Gemnez began diplomatically. "The magnetism of such an alliance would certainly bring all manner of desirable minions flocking to your combined banner, thus hastening the fruition of your separate goals."

"It doesn't smell right, toad," Hedrenatherax rumbled in reply. "Something is wrong." The archfiend fixed his infernal major domo with the twin suns of his baleful red eyes, his meaning unmistakable.

Hedrenatherax and Gemnez had reached Yaghur Hod's dais, and the great daemon stared down at them, his great lidless eyes betraying nothing. "This is the 'Lord of Vrack'?" The former Archodaemon asked, his voice issuing from the empty air, disembodied yet filled with regal indifference. "I had expected something more…formidable."

Hedrenatherax chuckled, the thick bass rumbling of his voice filling the cavernous chamber. "Formidable, you say?" Hedrenatherax said, his bestial features creased in a feral grin. "You speak of strength, or should I say, call to attention to the dearth of my own power, yet there you stand, humbled, broken, a great turd on the multiverse's biggest pile of dung." A collective hiss of rage rose from the assembled fiends, but Hedrenatherax was unfazed. "Look at this rabble! How can you call yourself 'Archodaemon' when no one but you, and maybe that fawning bitch beside you, believe it is true?"

Dyzaja bristled at Hedrenatherax's words, her right hand darting to

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the hilt of her rapier. She glowered down at the archfiend. "Let me slay this one for you, my lord," she said, turning to Yaghur Hod. "We need nothing from the likes of him."

"Yes, let your doxy there step down and add steel to her bold words," Hedrenatherax said. "Allow me to make you more of a pauper than you already are."

Gemnez placed one flabby hand upon Hedrenatherax's scythe-arm. "My lord, although I am *thrilled* at your sudden eloquence, this may not be the best negotiation tactic," Gemnez whispered. "Perhaps more humility would be in order…"

"Silence, toad!" Hedrenatherax spat, and shoved the great devil away from him. "Your betters are speaking."

The audience chamber had gone silent, the collected rabble of Yaghur Hod's court waiting to see how their lord would respond to Hedrenatherax's insolence. All watched and waited except a single impetuous barghest, one of a group that had been fawning at the foot of Yaghur Hod's dais.

The large hairy, goblin-like creature had foolishly decided to "prove" itself in the eyes of its master, hoping to gain Yaghur Hod's favor by slaying the upstart demon lord that dared insult him.

Thinking itself a cunning and stealthy beast, the barghest leapt at Hedrenatherax just as Gemnez was desperately trying to quell his lord's outburst. Assured that the demon lord was momentarily distracted by the bloated devil beside him, the barghest's surprise at Hedrenatherax's swift and brutal response to its attack was near complete.

Dreadskewer shot out like a great spiked piston, propelled by the unfathomable strength of Hedrenatherax's left arm. The spear's massive, barbed head struck the barghest in the center of its hairy chest, impaling the beast as it reached the terminus of its leap. The creature's body weight and the momentum of its fall further hastened its transfixion, and it coughed and spluttered in rage and agony as it slid down *Dreadskewer's* shaft. When the barghest reached the midway point of its descent along the spear's 15-foot length, Hedrenatherax's scythe-arm slashed out, removing the barghest's head in a gout of black ichor.

The demon lord felt the great spear's consciousness stir to life, thrumming hungrily as it tasted the blood of the barghest. But it was only a distant buzz in the back of Hedrenatherax's mind. The devil-skin glove he wore on his left hand blocked the spear's staggering intellect

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from usurping his own. The glove had been Gemnez's idea, for although Hedrenatherax was loath to admit it, he knew he lacked the strength to thwart *Dreadskewer's* will.

Hedrenatherax held the decapitated barghest off the floor, still impaled by *Dreadskewer*. He grinned up at Yaghur Hod as the corpse quaked violently in its death throes and loosed its bowels in a torrent of foulness upon the white stone of the daemon's audience chamber before finally quieting to stillness. The archfiend then upended his weapon, and pushed the corpse off of *Dreadskewer* with one taloned foot, much like a man might scrape a crushed insect from his boot.

The remaining barghests growled menacingly at Hedrenatherax, but none were foolish enough to follow their companion's ultimately futile example. The rest of the assembled fiends grumbled and hissed, but many of them had taken a step back, or erected what magical defenses they could, lest Hedrenatherax turn his ire upon the entire room.

Yaghur Hod watched the barghest's death unfold impassively, placing one slim, long-fingered hand on Dyzaja's forearm, restraining his paramour from leaping into battle with Hedrenatherax. The Archodaemon's outline suddenly shifted and blurred, heralding a change in form and drawing Hedrenatherax's attention away from the shattered corpse of the barghest at his feet.

"You dare spill blood without my leave?" Yaghur Hod asked, his words flowing from the elegant mouth of a slim, young human girl with raven-black hair. "I assure you, your words and actions here do not embolden me to aid you in your plight."

"Aid me?" Hedrenatherax asked. "You never had any intention of aiding me in anything. I knew that the moment I walked into this room," the massive demon said, returning *Dreadskewer* to its former position across his broad, scaled shoulders.

"Nonsense," Yaghur Hod replied, although the wan smile that crossed his now human lips told the real truth. "We have mutual interests, you and I."

"Nonsense?" Hedrenatherax repeated. "Then why can I not teleport away from this damnable place? And why have you assembled this pathetic mob of clingers-on to greet me?" The demon lord indicated Yaghur Hod's court with a sweep of *Dreadskewer*.

"Why would you wish to leave before our 'negotiations' have even commenced?" the girl-daemon asked, its lilting voice mock-innocent.

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"None may leave Har'Drok without my leave. I assure you there is no skullduggery on my part. As for my court, they were eager to attend this momentous occasion, the cementing of an alliance between Hades and the Abyss."

"Enough!" Hedrenatherax suddenly shouted, his voice echoing about the audience chamber in a cacophonous roar. "Enough of your posturing, daemon! Tell me why I am here and what it is you want, or gods help me I will bring this tower down upon your head!"

"Fair enough," Yaghur Hod said, unmoved by Hedrenatherax's outburst. "Tell him Gemnez," the girl-daemon commanded, waving one delicate hand at the devil, who had, despite his immense bulk, slipped unnoticed away from Hedrenatherax and stood behind the ranks of lesser fiends filling the room.

Hedrenatherax laughed mirthlessly. "Yes, fat one, tell me, who is the bigger fool? Me for believing your lies, or you for believing his?"

The great devil smiled, his gaudy lips painting a crimson smear of blood and teeth across his ghastly face. "Oh, I have no doubt that our esteemed host would betray me just as I have betrayed you, but one thing differs," Gemnez said smoothly.

"And what, pray tell, is that, fat one?" Hedrenatherax returned casually.

"Why, leverage, you brainless simpleton," Gemnez replied. "We both have something Yaghur Hod wants, although you have made the colossal blunder of bringing that something with you today. I, on the other hand, have secreted the desired object in a place well-guarded with loyal, and powerful, allies."

Hedrenatherax turned back to Yaghur Hod, who had again changed forms, appearing as a gray-robed man of advancing years. "It's the spear, isn't it?"

"Bravo, my dear demon," Yaghur Hod said. "Yes, *Dreadskewer* is what I want."

"Then come and take it, daemon. Come and take it, if you can," Hedrenatherax said, lifting *Dreadskewer* in an overhand grip, cocking the mighty weapon over his left shoulder.

"Ah, the brash predictability of demon-kind. So much easier to manipulate than the inscrutable rigidity of your devilish cousins," Yaghur Hod said. "Hear me, my subjects!" the Archodaemon suddenly shouted. "If any among your number can bring me this demon's spear, he shall find great

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favor in my eyes, and be rewarded with the stewardship of this tower."

A low rumble passed through the collected fiends in the audience chamber, and the air suddenly filled with a thick clamor of spells and weapons being readied.

"Finally, we get down to business," Hedrenatherax said as a wall of fiends advanced upon him from all directions. "Well, come on then, here I am. And here is your prize!"

The archfiend suddenly opened his mouth and spewed forth a great gout of steaming green bile. The horrid liquid splattered the first rank of advancing fiends, a group of ten insect-like cryptodaemons gripping cold iron daggers. The caustic substance elicited a chorus of buzz-like screams, as it began to eat through the protective chitin and then the flesh of the lesser daemons.

The fiendish advance halted, unnerved by Hedrenatherax's horrific attack and the terrible injuries inflicted on the cryptodaemons. The archfiend, however, was just getting started. His lips, still dripping with caustic green bile, formed the syllables of a dire arcane spell. The air danced and twisted as Hedrenatherax's spell smote reality with terrible magic, creating a cloud of baleful black energy in the midst of the now uncertain group of fiends.

The cloud roiled hideously, convulsing with vile energies, before taking on a foul material substance and twisting into a wild vortex of giant, disembodied teeth. The fiends in the immediate area were quickly snatched up and ground into paste beneath the gnashing onslaught of the toothy vortex. Others attempted to flee, but were sucked in by the vile winds of the spell and dragged screaming to their doom.

When Hedrenatherax's swirling whirlwind of destruction finally dissipated, all that was left of Yaghur Hod's horde of fiends was the lone cacodaemon – who had erected enough magical defenses to ward of the worst of the spell's effects – and the four remaining barghests, cowed and mewling at the foot of their master's dais.

Gemnez, also unscathed, had simply moved further away from the carnage, his great, flabby body dripping with slimy sweat at the effort it had taken him to move so quickly.

The cacodaemon, perhaps thinking it had weathered the worst Hedrenatherax had to offer, attempted to cast a spell of its own. The crocodile-headed fiend uttered the short, grating syllables of an attack spell, and Hedrenatherax was suddenly immolated in a column of green

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flame. The fire licked harmlessly against the demon lord's scaly integument, unable to pierce his considerable resistance to heat.

"Fire?" Hedrenatherax asked mockingly as the cacodaemon's attack sputtered and dissipated, having been absolutely ineffective. "And here I thought you cacodaemons were smart."

The demon lord shortened his grip on *Dreadskewer* and hurled the massive spear at the cacodaemon. The weapon hissed through the air, as if flung from a ballista, catching the cacodaemon in the back as it turned to flee. *Dreadskewer* punched through the fiend's body in a spray of black, viscous blood without slowing. It continued its flight to strike the far wall of the chamber some thirty yards distant, burying its cold-iron head in the stone. The spear lingered there for a fraction of an instant, quivering like a great arrow, and then disappeared with a faint whiff of sulfur to appear again in Hedrenatherax's gloved left hand.

The cacodaemon, despite the rather large hole in its midsection, attempted to cast another spell. It managed to utter only a single, blood-flecked cough before collapsing in a ragged, scaly heap on the cold stone of the audience chamber.

The death of the cacodaemon left only the four barghests, who wanted no part of Hedrenatherax's ire. They were attempting to creep up Yaghur Hod's dais, closer to their master. They were halted with a single cool glance from the great daemon. "Well?" Yaghur Hod asked. "There is your glory," he said, pointing to Hedrenatherax. "Go and take it."

The barghests, with no other choice, slunk down the steps of the dais to face their doom. Hedrenatherax was waiting for them, grinning with feral delight at yet more creatures to slay. The barghests split into pairs when they reached the foot of the dais, attempting to come at the demon lord from two directions. Hedrenatherax let them move around him, still grinning, *Dreadskewer* perched over his left shoulder again.

The two barghests to Hedrenatherax's left suddenly dropped to all fours and called upon their natural shapechanging abilities. The fiends' bodies writhed nastily, bones and muscle convulsed, joints popped, and then were grindingly reconfigured for quadrupedal locomotion. Finally, two massive wolf-like creatures stood where the barghests had been. Baying like great bloodhounds of hell, they surged forward.

Hedrenatherax met the barghests' charge with a sweeping strike of *Dreadskewer's* shaft, striking one of the fiends flush on the side of its fanged

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skull and knocking it senseless to the ground. The demon lord followed this attack by swiveling his body to one side, letting the second barghest charge by, its jaws closing on empty air with a drool-splattering snap. Hedrenatherax brought his scythe-arm down in a vicious overhand chop as the barghest sprinted past, cleaving the creature completely in twain just behind the thick muscles of its shoulders. The barghest came apart in a spray of blood, adding a slick of ropy entrails and black fiendish ichor to the already gore-soaked floor.

The second pair of barghests, noting their companions failed efforts, resorted to what natural magic they commanded, and suddenly grew to twice their normal size. Now, nearly the same size as their opponent, the two enlarged barghests moved in warily, careful of Hedrenatherax's extended reach with *Dreadskewer.*

Hedrenatherax watched the two barghests circle him, holding *Dreadskewer* braced against one foot like a pikeman preparing for a cavalry charge. When his opponents had flanked him, Hedrenatherax suddenly lurched forward, throwing his weight towards the barghest in front of him, causing it to recoil away from an expected thrust with *Dreadskewer*.

Sensing an opening, the second barghest moved in, hoping to gain a tactical advantage while Hedrenatherax's momentum carried him away from the attack. The demon lord felt the barghest behind him and grinned, knowing that the beast had fallen for his ruse. In response to the threat from behind, Hedrenatherax slammed his left arm backwards, the joint twisting in a manner that was wholly unnatural, propelling *Dreadskewer's* iron butt cap with brutal force into the barghest's bestial face. Bone crunched, and the beast fell over backwards, clutching the ruins of its face and howling in agony.

In the flash of an instant, Hedrenatherax reversed the motion of his weapon, and pistoned his great arm forward, leaning his whole body into the strike to add nearly ten feet of reach to *Dreadskewer's* fifteen-foot haft. The barghest in front of the demon lord had moved a single step closer, preparing to aid its companion's attack from the rear. This turned out to be a fatal mistake. The mere ten feet it had moved, which the barghest perceived to be well out of Hedrenatherax's range, brought it just close enough for *Dreadskewer's* razored tip to puncture its right eye socket, piercing the eye and the brain behind it. The barghest shuddered once as Hedrenatherax withdrew his weapon, and then collapsed to the ground.

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Hedrenatherax silenced the cries of the downed barghest behind him with a casual thrust of *Dreadskewer*. The barghest that had been felled with the spear's shaft was dispatched by the demon lord's great calloused foot thundering down upon it skull, splattering bone fragments and brain matter in all directions.

"Well done," Yaghur Hod said coolly, glancing around at the shattered ruins of his court.

Hedrenatherax shrugged. "I've had bowel movements that required more effort," he said sarcastically, returning *Dreadskewer* to its place across his shoulders.

"Then you should find Dyzaja here to be a most fulfilling challenge," Yaghur Hod said, patting the fiendish night hag on the shoulder. "Bring me the spear, my love."

"Gladly," Dyzaja said, drawing here rapier with a slithering, metallic hiss. She then leaped from the dais, her slight form coming to rest fifteen feet from the waiting Hedrenatherax.

In response to Dyzaja's movement, Hedrenatherax brought *Dreadskewer* into an overhand grip, cocked over his left shoulder, and held his scythe arm low, poised to deliver a brutal underhanded slash. The casual grace with which he had fought the barghests and the rest of Yaghur Hod's lesser fiends disappeared. It was replaced with the icy calm of a creature that had seen a thousand battles and had slain countless creatures, both mighty and insignificant.

"Are you ready to bleed, demon lord?" Dyzaja asked, swishing her blade through the air and moving forward slowly, deliberately.

"As ready as you are, I suspect," Hedrenatherax returned, moving to his left, circling away from the night hag to keep the advantage of *Dreadskewer's* reach.

Gemnez, who had watched the slaughter of Yaghur Hod's court from a safe distance, was grinning and rubbing his fat, eager hands together. He stood some fifty yards from Hedrenatherax and Dyzaja as they slowly circled each other, wondering how such powerful creatures could be so easily manipulated.

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Hazergal soared over the barren Abyssal plains of Vrack, reveling in the singing wind as it danced across his skin. His vrock body, streamlined and aerodynamic, cut through the air with knife-like precision despite its owner's lack of experience on the wing. The ground below stretched into limitless perpetuity, broken only by a chain of towering black mountains on the far horizon.

Ahead, rising from the smooth monotony of the Abyssal plain, a foreboding keep of black stone loomed. The bleak edifice was ungainly, ugly and coarse, lacking any aesthetic grace—much like its owner, the unlikely conqueror Hedrenatherax. Behind the Lord of Vrack's new abode lay Hazergal's destination: the shattered ruins of Pyrak's once grand floating citadel, pulled from the air when its master was overthrown. Its ivory white pillars and soaring battlements now lay in ignoble ruin, infested with minor demons, like vermin in a peasant's hovel.

Returning to the domain of Pyrak had lost was difficult for the former mortal. Many painful memories lurked in the dust-laden air or howled along with banshee screech of the wind. It was here his nightmarish ascent into the ranks of demonkind had begun. He remembered clearly the terror he had known on entering Pyrak's audience chamber that first time. How impotent and alone he had felt, laying there on the cold stone of the demon lord's abode, listening to the great fiend describe his doom.

Hazergal neared Hedrenatherax's tower unchallenged. The skies above the plains of Vrack were much emptier since Pyrak's death. Most of the former demon lord's vrocks had defected to the service of Pazuzu rather than serve the new, oafish master of this realm.

A small flock of quasits hovered over Hedrenatherax's abode, the only flying creatures Hazergal had seen since he had returned to Vrack. The tiny demons scattered in terror as the former archmage neared, screeching and cursing in Abyssal.

As he passed over, Hazergal glanced down at the newly built citadel of Hedrax. He noted only a token force of demons manning the battlements, mostly babau armed with long spears. He saw only one demon of higher

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station, a fat, toad-like hezrou, squatting atop one of the four towers of Hedrax, casually consuming the corpse of a babau. None of the demons paid any attention to the lone vrock flying overhead.

This return to Vrack had been carefully timed by Gemnez and Hazergal's newest "benefactor," the demon lord Pazuzu. Thanks to the rogue horned devil, Hedrenatherax was absent from his domain, having been led away to Hades and into an ill-advised meeting with the legendary Yaghur Hod.

Gemnez, of course, had secretly contacted the Archodaemon beforehand, and had arranged for Hedrenatherax's destruction. The price of such aid must have been staggering, and Gemnez would not divulge to Hazergal or Pazuzu what the Archodaemon's assistance had cost. Yaghur Hod was no bumbling fool like Hedrenatherax, and even Gemnez's oily skills would only motivate the mighty daemon so far.

The reasons Gemnez had given for leading Hedrenatherax to Hades – and what likely would be the demon lord's doom – were twofold. First, the destruction of Hedrenatherax would allow Hazergal and Gemnez to assume control of Vrack. This would grant Hazergal the space and freedom to explore his budding powers, in which the rogue devil was keenly interested. Secondly, of course, was the obvious: Hedrenatherax's current absence had allowed Hazergal to return to Vrack unmolested.

Of course, no one really knew just how powerful Hedrenatherax was. His powers were untested, and there was the off chance that he might actually slay Yaghur Hod and become even more powerful in the process. The wily Gemnez had provided for this unlikely event as well. Even if the Lord of Vrack returned, Hazergal would be long gone, having already absconded with the item Pazuzu desired – the demon blade *Fiendbleeder.*

Hazergal surmised that *Fiendbleeder* would still be in the ruins of Pyrak's citadel. According to Gemnez, the blade had rejected Hedrenatherax during the former balor's battle with his master, and it was likely that he had simply left the blade where it lay. If this were true, then it would be a simple task to enter the ruins, find Pazuzu's prize, and escape back to Pazunia. If, however, Hedrenatherax had somehow contrived a way to keep *Fiendbleeder,* then Hazergal would have to find some way into Hedrax. And that was not a proposition he relished.

Once past Hedrax, Hazergal descended rapidly to the ground. Landing was still a bit tricky, and he'd had to resort to spells that slowed his fall on a

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number of occasions to avoid a painful and embarrassing re-acquaintance with the ground. This time, however, he managed to flare his wings in just the right way, slowing his momentum, and allowing him to touch down in a more or less perfect landing.

The jumbled ruins of Pyrak's floating citadel thrust up from the windswept plane like the bleached bones of some great beast. The citadel lay on its side, its collapsed towers and battlements creating a deep labyrinth of tunnels, perfect hiding places for the scores of lesser demons that now inhabited the once mighty stronghold. Hazergal had little to fear from individual dretch or babau, although in great numbers they could present a real threat.

Hazergal moved towards the ruins, his eyes scanning the tumbled masonry for an entrance large enough to admit him. He knew that *Fiendbleeder* would likely be in Pyrak's throne room, where his battle with Hedrenatherax had taken place. Hazergal remembered this room well, for it was there that he had been brought after his capture on the gateway plane of Abrigor. He recalled clearly laying on his back, his power made impotent by the magical collar around his neck. He remembered looking up through the great transparent ceiling of the massive room… *The ceiling,* Hazergal thought suddenly. *I can get in that way.*

Instead of winding his way through the broken ruins of the citadel, Hazergal could simply fly to the top, search for the great transparent ceiling, and smash his way through. He spread his wings and vaulted into the air, climbing the two hundred feet to the top of the ruins. He perched precariously on one of the citadel's towers, digging his talons into the stone to keep his balance. It didn't take him long to locate Pyrak's throne room. It stood prominently in the middle of the ruins, a great glass dome, like a transparent blister on the surface of the bone-white stone.

Negotiating the ruins was another matter entirely. The citadel rested on its side, making it exceedingly difficult to get to the throne room without clinging to the masonry like an insect, or making some kind of controlled fall. Hazergal had nowhere near the expertise with his wings to accomplish such a descent, but he did have an almost unlimited array of magic at his disposal.

A simple spell sprang to mind, appearing at the fore of his consciousness as if he had plucked it from a well-indexed library. Hazergal aimed his body at the transparent dome of the throne room and then stepped off the tower

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into empty air. Instead of plummeting to this doom, he floated slowly, like a falling feather. He used the projecting crenellations, towers, and other shattered pieces of the citadel to guide and aim his descending body toward his destination. Just before Hazergal reached the transparent dome, another simple spell rolled of his tongue. This incantation allowed him to stick to the surface of the dome, clambering over the smooth crystal like an insect.

Hazergal was prepared to unleash a very powerful spell to disintegrate a portion of the glassy dome, but soon saw that there was no need. The citadel's impact with the earth had fractured the dome in many places, and there were a number of large holes in the transparent material. Hazergal moved, spider-like, over to the nearest breach and jumped through. He activated another spell to slow his falling on the way down, and reached the interiors of the throne room without so much as whisper.

The way the citadel had come to rest after its meteoric plummet to the ground made the interior of Pyrak's throne room a bizarre sight. The "floor" was the east wall, while the inside of the transparent dome made up the west wall. The ceiling and floor blended the transparent dome with what had been the east and west walls of the room, creating a double-bowl shape above and below. Pyrak's great black throne projected from the east wall, while the rows of carved columns created a disorienting set of stone bars that ran the length of the room. The great double doors that led into the throne room now dominated the southern wall. They hung open drunkenly, exposing the thick darkness of the ruins beyond.

Hazergal's climbing spell was still active, and would remain so for hours. This allowed him to move about the room unimpeded. He clambered about, searching amidst the shattered masonry that had been knocked free from the walls and carved columns. He found two skeletons, both of which had suffered horrendous wounds.

The first skeleton was of a large, winged fiend. It did not belong to any type of demon or devil he was familiar with, although it certainly featured aspects of both fiendish races. The death stroke was difficult to determine, for the beast has suffered what appeared to be dozens of slashing wounds. Bones in the skeleton's chest, arms, and legs had been hacked neatly into pieces. Death could have been from blood loss, shock, or more than likely, significant trauma to a major organ.

The second skeleton, which Hazergal found near the south wall, was much easier to identify. It was, or had been, a marilith. Hazergal

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remembered Gemnez telling him about Heskera, Pyrak's marilith general, slain by Hedrenatherax moments after his ascension to demon lord. The fat devil had lamented her death, for he believed that she would have been a valuable ally.

The cause of Heskera's death was easy to identify. Hazergal found her skeleton in two separate pieces. The spine had been shorn neatly in half just below the waist. He also noticed a wide, black stain on the east wall, on what had been the section of floor where Heskera had died and bled out.

Hazergal continued to search the large room, but it was soon obvious that what he was looking for was not there. *Fiendbleeder* was not in the throne room, nor was Pyrak's corpse. It was very likely that Hedrenatherax had claimed the body of his former master as a trophy of his conquest.

Damn! Hazergal cursed silently. He had no desire to attempt a furtive infiltration of a demon lord's abode. An attempt to enter Hedrax alone would likely end in his destruction, no matter what kind of power he commanded. The castle housed thousands of minor demons, a threat he could likely deal with on a battlefield where he could smash groups of lesser fiends with powerful magics. But alone, in a confined space, he could be overwhelmed. It would be a battle of attrition, and though he would almost certainly slay hundreds before they brought him down, the demons of Hedrax *would* bring him down eventually.

Hazergal turned his formidable intellect to the problem of entering Hedrax. His options were limited. He could return to Pazuzu's realm and beseech aid from the mighty demon lord, but he loathed putting himself further in the great fiend's debt. A frontal assault on the castle was ridiculous, even for him. Certainly, he could slay many demons, but the walls of Hedrax were thick; if he were to alert the demons there to his presence, they would focus all of their resources upon him. Slipping into the castle unnoticed was a better option, but it presented problems of its own.

He could, of course, mask his presence with magic, but demons were notoriously perceptive, even the lesser ones, and it was likely he would be noticed before he could reach his destination. Which led him to the other difficulty he faced. He had no idea where Hedrenatherax would keep *Fiendbleeder.* Even if he penetrated Hedrax's many defenses, fumbling blindly through the keep would likely lead to a lethal confrontation.

Hazergal was saved the necessity of choosing one of these less-than-optimal methods of entering Hedrax by a guttural voice behind him, from

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the direction of the throne room's entryway.

"Well, well, well. Look what we have here, my pets. It's an itsy-bitsy vrock, all by his lonesome." The voice contained a gurgling, slopping resonance that was painful to here.

Hazergal spun around to see a massive babau demon standing in the shadows beyond the immense double doors. The babau was surrounded by nearly a dozen dretches, and each of the small, flabby demons was eyeing Hazergal with obvious hunger.

Hazergal narrowed his eyes at the babau, and brought a powerful spell to mind. The babau was the largest of its kind he had ever seen, easily as tall as Hazergal, although very gaunt.

"What do you want, babau?" Hazergal asked, pushing as much menace and condescension into his voice as possible.

"What does Igyx want?" the babau asked, pointing to its own slime covered body. "Igyx needs to feeds his pets. They're awful hungry. Aren't you, my lovelies?"

The pack of dretches began to mutter and fawn around the babau's feet, heedlessly burning themselves on the caustic slime coating the babau's body.

"That's rich, *urghling*, " Hazergal said, using the Abyssal slang word for a lesser demon. It translated roughly to "worthless fecal matter." "How do you suppose a pack of dretches and yourself would constitute even brisk exercise for one such as I?"

"Oh, the vrock has some venom in his spleen," Igyx said, chuckling. "But that just makes him taste better, doesn't it my pets?"

The babau spoke to the dretches the way a pampered noblewoman might coo to a small dog. It was revolting.

"Listen, Igyx," Hazergal said. "I am searching for something, and if you tell me where it is, I won't destroy you. I shall even reward you if you can help me."

"It wants to reward us, my lumpy ones," Igyx crowed to his fawning pack of dretches. "But its flesh is all the reward we need."

The dretches, as if compelled by a mental command from their master, surged forward. The pack of lowly demons was more than fifty feet away from Hazergal, where he stood on the inside of the glass dome. The dretches, already slow moving, had to clamber clumsily over fallen masonry to get at their prey. When they reached the slick surface of the transparent dome,

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their tiny claws found no purchase, and they began to slip and fall on one another, creating a tangled knot of wriggling demonic flesh.

This slapstick advance gave Hazergal plenty of time to unleash a spell. When the final intonation of the powerful enchantment smote the air, a blazing, sword-shaped construct appeared before the vrock mage. With a wave of his hand, the shimmering blade of force streaked toward the bumbling pack of dretches. It cut into the tangle of minor demons like a hot knife through butter, splashing their foul ichor in all directions.

"Nooo! My pets!" Igyx screamed. The babau's face was wrenched into a rictus of grief. Grief that Hazergal saw was very real.

Hazergal held up his hand, and the mage blade suddenly stopped in mid stroke. There were still half a dozen dretches still alive, although they were spattered in their packmates' gore, making it difficult to tell the living from the dead.

"If I let the rest live, will you help me?" Hazergal asked.

"Yes, Igyx will help. *Just don't huuuurt them anymore!*" the babau wailed, clutching his head in a bizarre display of maternal pain.

"Fine," Hazergal said, and with a short barked phrase, dismissed the mage blade. It blinked out of existence with a faint *pop*.

"Come back to me, my lovelies," Igyx beckoned to the dretches. They returned to him mewling and whining like a pack of mangy dogs.

"Now you will answer some questions," Hazergal said.

"Yes," Igyz said. "Ask your questions, vrock."

"How long have you dwelled within these ruins?"

"Since the master pulled the other master's house down."

"There was a sword in this room," Hazergal said. "A great black sword."

"Yes, *Fiendbleeder* was here. Master Pyrak kept it here always."

Hazergal brightened. "Do you know where it is?"

"The other master took it. He took it to his new house," Igyx replied. "Why do you want the sword? It is too strong. Too smart."

"It does not matter why I need it," Hazergal said, dismissing Igyx's question. "Do you know where Hedrenatherax keeps it?"

"Yes, Igyx takes his pets to look at the sword… and the great master."

"You've seen *Fiendbleeder?*" Hazergal burst out. "How? How did you get into Hedrax?"

"There is a tunnel. My pets dug it for me. Didn't you, my scruffy ones?" Igyx squatted down and caressed his dretches, scratching behind their ears,

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and eliciting a chorus of pleased mewling and muttering.

Hazergal shuddered in revulsion. "Can you take me to this tunnel?"

Igyx looked up, the babau's eyes narrowed. It sensed an advantage. "What does it offer Igyx for the pain it has caused my pets? Why should I help it?"

Enough of this nonsense, Hazergal thought, anger flashing bright in his eyes. He coughed a single powerful arcane syllable and the dretch nearest Igyx exploded. The detonation spread dretch gore in a radius of thirty feet, covering its master and the remaining dretches with dripping, greasy ichor.

Igyx screamed. His voice climbed in octaves until it reached a near earsplitting shriek. When the scream faded, the babau clutched the clotted remains of the detonated dretch to his chest and sobbed.

"You've got five left, Igyx," Hazergal said. "I can destroy them one at a time or all at once, your choice."

"NO!" the babau howled. "Igyx will show you."

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Hedrenatherax circled his diminutive opponent in his accustomed stance, the great spear *Dreadskewer* cocked over his left shoulder. He had nearly twenty feet of reach on his enemy, this fiendish night hag called Dyzaja, and was four times as large. Still, for all his bluster, he knew a worthy foe when he saw one.

Dyzaja moved with a liquid grace, her sword held before her, a cold iron needle, deadly despite its minute size. The fiendish night-hag fluttered her wings as she moved, lashing them about her body, hiding the majority of her movement from view.

"What do you wait for, hag?" Hedrenatherax asked, mock jabbing with *Dreadskewer.*

Dyzaja ignored the feint and tightened her circle. She was now within easy striking distance of *Dreadksewer's* barbed point. "Just counting the holes in your stance, demon. Thirty-seven so far."

Hedrenatherax snorted in derision. "You think that little pricker you've got there frightens me? I might save it as a toothpick to pry your innards from my teeth."

She's faster than me, Hedrenatherax thought as he watched his opponent circle closer. *Let's see how fast.* The great demon lord suddenly thrust his head forward, opened his cavernous mouth, and spewed a torrent of caustic bile at Dyzaja. The noxious liquid spread out in a wide cone, enough to cover a dozen creatures his opponent's size. But not a drop of the burning effluvium touched the graceful hag.

Dyzaja's form blurred, and she ran, not away from the Hedrenatherax's vile attack, but toward it. The night hag moved like a hummingbird, her form an insubstantial shimmer as it darted forward under the cone of caustic spew.

Hedrenatherax's eyes flew wide as he saw the attack materialize, but was far too slow to avoid it. He felt the burning agony of the night hag's rapier as she buried the cold iron spike to the hilt in his gut. The blade parted his steel-hard flesh without so much as a pause. He loosed a bellow of pure pain and anger that shook the foundations of Yaghur Hod's audience chamber.

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Dyzaja's strike had wounded Hedrenatherax, but so swift and deep was her thrust that her blade became momentarily lodged in the demon lord's thick muscle. The split second it took to withdraw her rapier allowed Hedrenatherax to land a desperate smash with his scythe arm. The angle of the attack was awkward, and the demon lord was unable to use the cutting edge of the great bony blade. But the off balance, back-handed blow carried enough force to pluck the night hag off her feet and hurl her thirty feet away to crash against the bottom step of Yaghur Hod's dais.

The great Archodaemon's form shifted and changed into that of the haggard old human, His face was creased with worry. "Let me stop this, my love," he pleaded.

"No, my lord. The old accords still apply, if you slay him in your house, it will rob you of your power. I will finish this for you," Dyzaja replied, bounding to her feet.

"As you wish. Kill him quickly."

Hedrenatherax had stumbled away from his opponent, *Dreadskewer* held out in front of him. The demon lord's abdomen was covered in his own stinking, black blood.

"I don't suppose you would like to switch sides again, toad," Hedrenatherax said over his shoulder to Gemnez, who still lingered in the far corner of the room, watching the battle unfold.

"Oh no, my lord," Gemnez replied. "Even if I wished to aid you – and I do not – it would be quite rude to interfere."

"What? Why?" Hedrenatherax asked, perplexed.

"Because Har'Drok was built with the accords in mind." Dyzaja replied, moving away from Yaghur Hod's dais and towards her foe again.

"What accords?" Hedrenatherax asked, and moved to his left, circling away from Dyzaja.

"Such an dullard," Gemnez snorted. "Can you fit anything in that great cavernous space between your ears beyond your immediate desires?"

"Toad," Hedrenatherax said, eyes still firmly fixed on his opponent, "if I live through this I am going to roast you on a spit and eat your organs while you still kick and scream."

"Only a servant of Yaghur Hod may slay you in his house," Gemnez said. "By the accords of Narghal Zoran, signed in blood by the first Archodaemon," Gemnez inclined his head toward Yaghur Hod, "and an ancient demon lord, Narghal Zoran."

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Hedrenatherax suddenly lunged forward with a grunt, *Dreadskewer's* barbed point rushing toward Dyzaja's face. The night hag spun like a dancer away from the spear point and shoved it aside with the hilt of her rapier. Then, as the spear's end dipped to the ground, Dyzaja placed a foot on the haft and in a single springing motion jumped onto *Dreadskewer* itself and dashed up the weapons length.

Hedrenatherax tried to backpedal away from his foe, but Dyzaja was supernaturally fast. Again she sunk the blade of her rapier into the demon lord's flesh, this time in the thick muscle of his right thigh. Hedrenatherax howled and swiped at his smaller foe with his scythe arm, but she pulled her weapon free easily, and then tumbled like an acrobat under and away from the demon lord's clumsy strike.

Now limping, Hedrenatherax backed away from Dyzaja, leaving a trail of thick, black blood behind him. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in a toe-to-toe fight, would you, bitch!?" Hedrenatherax snarled.

"Not in the least," Dyzaja replied, dancing around her foe with an economy of motion that would put a stalking tiger to shame.

Gemnez had moved closer to the combat, now quite certain that Dyzaja would slay Hedrenatherax easily. "Before you die, my lord, let me continue your instruction in the most intriguing history of the accords. You see, the accords allowed powerful fiends, such as our host Yaghur Hod here, to entertain one another without the possibility of a lethal conflict. Sites empowered with the accords, like Har'Drok, meant that the host could not personally engage in any violent confrontation with his guest. Violation of the accord would strip a fiend of most of his power, making him easy prey for his opponent. Of course, this does not prevent the servants of such an archfiend from engaging in violent action towards a guest. Something, I'm sure you are now quite aware of." Gemnez paused, smiling. "Typically this was not an issue, since even under the accords most archfiends traveled with a powerful retinue of servants, which protected them from any aggression from their host. You, however—quite foolishly, I might add—came here alone."

"That is *fascinating,* toad," Hedrenatherax grunted and faked another thrust at Dyzaja. This time, however, he had timed her movements, and as she spun aside from the thrust to run up the spear's shaft, he simply dropped the weapon, and slashed with his scythe arm.

Dyzaja almost ran into a blow that would have cut her in two, but she

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was viper fast, and the thin blade of her rapier shot up to meet the massive cutting blade of Hedrenatherax's scythe arm. Sparks flashed crimson as the two weapons met, but the rapier held, although Dyzaja was knocked sideways and sprawling by the blow.

Hedrenatherax howled in triumph, charged forward and scooped up *Dreadskewer*. Dyzaja lay on her back, vulnerable and weak. The demon lord reached his fallen opponent in two great strides, the great spear poised to skewer her. But before he could drive *Dreadskewer* down into her flesh, the night hag pointed her index finger at the looming demon lord and spoke a single guttural syllable. Five globes of searing green light answered Dyzaja's arcane summons and flashed into Hedrenatherax's face. The minor spell failed to pierce the demon lord's resistance to magical energies, but it surprised him and fouled his aim by just a few inches.

Dreadskewer's point slammed into the stone floor a hair's breadth from Dyzaja's face. The near miss did not faze her, however, and she rolled forward between the demon lord's legs, her blade flashing up under Hedrenatherax's brass kilt and into a delicate portion of his anatomy as she passed.

Hedrenatherax's shrieked, dropped *Dreadskewer*, and clutched his savaged groin.

"Oh, well played, Dyzaja. Well played," Gemnez said, chuckling and clapping his flabby claws together. "What were you saying earlier about her *little pricker,* my lord?"

Yaghur Hod's wizened face remained impassive as he watched the duel unfold, but Dyzaja's last successful attack had brought a glint of confidence into the Archodaemon's eyes.

"I…will…kill…all…of…you," Hedrenatherax gasped. Again he had retreated from Dyzaja, and now rested with his back to the north wall of the massive audience chamber.

"That seems unlikely," Gemnez replied. "But let me point out to you that you are not the only fool in this room."

"Careful, devil," Yaghur Hod said, turning an angry glare on the fat fiend.

"Why? You cannot harm me, any more than my oafish friend there," Gemnez said icily.

"No. The accords only protect archfiends and their servants," Yaghur Hod said, his grip tightening on the haft of his great scythe *Blightrazor.*

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"You are neither, devil. Your betrayal of Hedrenatherax has left you vulnerable."

"Almost right, lord Yaghur Hod. I did betray Hedrenatherax, but the accords might still apply to me."

"How?" Yaghur Hod said, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Allow me to explain, my lord." Gemnez answered. "I exist in a flux, halfway between the coarse form of a cornugon and the dread majesty of the archdevil. Which part do you think the accords will recognize?" Gemnez leveled his inscrutable, calculating gaze on the Archodaemon before him.

"So you seek to betray me," Yaghur Hod said.

"Not necessarily. My decision rests on the outcome of this duel," Gemnez said. "You are far too beholden to the old ways, my lord. There is a reason the current Archodaemon abandoned Har'Drok. Sites sanctioned with accord magic have been abandoned across the planes. No archfiend is willing to risk his power in such a way. Such ideas are considered antiquated and foolish."

"No, not foolish," Yaghur Hod snapped. "The accords were created to prevent the kind of 'foolishness' that now pervades the planes. This idiotic war between devil and demon has consumed and supplanted the proper order of things. Even my race has become embroiled in this lunacy, hiring themselves out as mercenary soldiers in a war that has no end and cannot be won."

"Then you mean to set it all to rights, then?" Gemnez asked, his tone mocking. "The great Yaghur Hod will show us the way. What drivel! You are alone, fool!"

"Not so alone as you think, devil," Yaghur Hod said. The Archodaemon's form shimmered and he appeared again in his true body, the great faceless fiend. "*Blightrazor,* together with its brothers, *Dreadskewer* and *Fiendbleeder,* is all the power I shall need to create my empire once more."

Gemnez's eyes widened. "The weapons are related?"

"Of course, they were forged by my own hand. Each imbued with a portion of my will and power."

"I see, Gemnez said, frowning. "And if you gather them to you again, your power will be restored and you will be free to command the multitudes of daemonic life, just as you did before your imprisonment?"

"Correct. And you have brought one of the weapons to my doorstep,"

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Yaghur Hod said, his giant glassy eyes lighting up with crimson in what Gemnez guessed was the faceless Archodaemon's version of a smile.

"Then we are all fools," Gemnez muttered. "You, me, and especially the great oaf yonder."

Hedrenatherax listened to Gemnez and Yaghur Hod talking across the room. His eyes fastened on *Dreadskewer*, which lay on the floor where he had dropped it. *I should have buried that thing in a latrine and forgotten about it,* he though. *Dreadskewer* had brought him nothing but misery, and now it would likely bring his short and ineffective reign to a bloody close. Dyzaja, unwounded and full of dire intent, was stalking towards him. The night hag tossed her sword from hand to hand, mocking him, begging him to move forward and end his life upon the cold iron blade.

The wound she had dealt him bled profusely, and he doubted that his right leg would support his body should he need to flee. For a moment he lamented the loss of his balor body, which had been blessed with wings. If he could fly, he might be able to escape Har'Drok.

"Shall I make it quick, demon?" Dyzaja asked as she moved in for the kill. "Or does your pride demand that you linger a bit?"

Hedrenatherax chuckled liquidly, coughing up a mouthful of blood. "I like you, Dyzaja. You know how to give a beating and make it count. That's a rare trait, even in Hades."

"One does one what can," The night hag said with a short bow, her strange dichotomous face suddenly beautiful.

Hedrenatherax pushed himself from the wall that had been supporting his mammoth frame, and spoke a single guttural phrase. *Dreadskewer* appeared suddenly in his hand, and he cocked it over his left shoulder. "I'm ready, hag," he said, and limped forward.

Dyzaja whipped her blade up in a short salute and then moved in for the kill.

"It ends now," Yaghur Hod said as he watched Dyzaja stalk forward to finish her opponent. "So, devil, who will you throw in with? Me or the offal out there?"

"We shall see," Gemnez said.

"You would make a capable ally, Gemnez," Yaghur Hod said, his voice softening, warming up to the pitch he was about to make. "I would honor our previous arrangement. You could maintain control of the Hedrenatherax's Abyssal plane, rally support for me there, and share in the glory of my

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eventual conquest."

"How tempting," Gemnez said. His eyes were focused on the duel that was about to end at the other side of the room.

Hedrenatherax stood thirty feet away from his opponent, his body shaking with blood loss and fatigue. He leveled the point of *Dreadskewer* at his foe, and held his scythe arm up, ready to deliver an overhand slash.

Dyzaja danced in, her rapier flickering out like the tongue of a serpent. It was only a feint designed to test her foe's reflexes. Hedrenatherax simply moved out of range, still keeping his spear level.

"Why do you prolong this, demon?" Dyzaja asked, and then suddenly whirled in and past Hedrenatherax's spear to pink his left arm. She whirled out from under his guard and away just as quickly. She did not give her opponent the time to even think about a counter-strike, let alone make one.

Hedrenatherax ignored the question and the wound. He had one ploy left, one chance to emerge the victor. *Come in once more. Once more,* he thought, preparing his body for one last burst of strength and will.

"Enough of this," Dyzaja said. The night hag suddenly broke into a dead charge.

In response to her movement Hedrenatherax brought *Dreadskewer* up and over his shoulder and then hurled the mighty spear at the charging night hag. Dyzaja avoided the missile easily, smiling mockery at such a foolish tactic.

Hedrenatherax backpedaled, his wounded leg close to buckling beneath him. *Just a few more seconds,* he thought desperately as he watched his opponent knife towards him.

Dreadskewer appeared suddenly in Hedrenatherax's left hand, and he slammed the butt of the spear into the ground, with the point leveled at Dyzaja, now less than a foot away. Dyzaja realized her mistake an instant before it was too late, and threw her body to the side.

It was not enough.

Yaghur Hod saw what was about to happen and called out to his lover, but his voice was drowned out by the night hag's screeching, agonized cry.

The barbed point of the great spear plowed through the night hag's side, sundering flesh and bone, like a branding iron through tissue paper. The Dyzaja's last-minute gyrations kept the spear from catching her in the gut, but the wound was still dire.

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Hedrenatherax released his grip on *Dreadskewer,* leaving Dyzaja impaled on the weapon's shaft, and rushed in, limping madly, to finish his opponent off. The night hag could not flee with the gargantuan spear piercing her body, but she too had one trick left.

With a deft flick of her wrist, Dyzaja changed her grip on her rapier and hurled it at the charging demon lord. Hedrenatherax, just like Dyzaja, was unable to dodge the unexpected attack, and the cold iron blade buried itself to the hilt in his broad chest.

Hedrenatherax went down like felled ox. He let out a single coughing wheeze as the rapier pierced his lung, and then collapsed onto his back with a thunderous crash and lay still.

With her opponent neutralized, Dyzaja grasped *Dreadskewer* and pushed the weapon through her body. Again she shrieked, but she was free of the transfixing spear. The night hag stumbled over to Hedrenatherax, who still lived, and grasped the hilt of her rapier from where it jutted from the demon lord's chest, quivering like an oddly shaped arrow.

"Finish him, my love," Yaghur Hod called out, starting down the dais. He wanted to witness the demon lord's death up close and personal. Gemnez followed the Archodaemon. His face was an impassive wall, but his eyes were alive with possibilities.

The daemon and the rogue devil reached the great supine form of Hedrenatherax. The demon lord was breathing shallowly, blood bubbling through his tusks and frothing down upon his chest. Dyzaja stood over him, sword poised to deliver the fatal blow.

"Come…to gloat…fat one?" Hedrenatherax wheezed, his lips rankling in a blood-caked sneer.

"No, my lord," Gemnez whispered. "I had hoped your death would be more glorious. Not even you deserve this."

"Oh, come now, Gemnez," Yaghur Hod said. "You cannot have any pity for this beast?"

"Not for him. I pity a multiverse where only a creature such as you can bring balance to the planes," Gemnez said.

Yaghur Hod's form blurred, and he again appeared as the wizened human man. "I am the only hope for all three races."

Gemnez suddenly smiled, his ruby lips splitting wide to reveal rows of needle-like fangs. "No, my lord. There is another."

Hedrenatherax watched something change in the fat devil. Something

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he had seen before. The simpering fop Gemnez often played suddenly disappeared, and in its place an ancient and powerful creature stirred. Hedrenatherax smiled despite his pain, and loosed a single blood-soaked chuckle just before the room exploded into chaos.

The spiked chain Gemnez wore around his vast waist was suddenly and inexplicably in his hands. The great devil moved with a speed that only Hedrenatherax believed was possible, snaking the barbed links of his chain out and around Dyzaja's throat.

Even Yaghur Hod, the great and powerful daemon had not seen this outcome. He could only stare in shock as Gemnez yanked savagely on his chain and the barbed blades that ran its length cut into Dyzaja's flesh. The night hag's head rolled from her body in a thick gout of greenish bile, and her quivering corpse collapsed over Hedrenatherax.

Gemnez wrapped his chain around his wrist with a deft flick of his meaty arm, and turned to the stunned Archodaemon beside him. "I'm sorry, my lord. I have decided our agreement is no longer satisfactory to my needs."

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Igyx led Hazergal through a bewildering array of tunnels, some barely large enough to admit the bulky babau and vrock. Overhead, the jumbled weight of the ruined citadel groaned and shifted, and on a number of occasions Hazergal was sure that the whole structure would suddenly collapse upon their heads.

The odd, tilted angle of the ruins made traversing the tunnels difficult, as did the five dretches that swarmed around Igyx like eager puppies. The small demons managed to get underfoot constantly, making the treacherous journey through the ruins all the more arduous.

Igyx treated the dretches like children – or at least very pampered pets – cooing and whispering to them as they traveled. The whole display was one of the most revolting and bizarre things Hazergal had yet seen on the Abyss, and the urge to simply obliterate the fawning dretches and their master was very strong. But he held back his anger and his magic. He needed Igyx…for the moment.

Hazergal and his strange guide passed through hundreds of rooms and galleries, now empty save for a few scurrying quasits that infested the ruins like rats in a hovel. Even now, shattered and broken, Pyrak's citadel was beautiful. The architecture, although horrifyingly alien in some places, was of such exquisite quality that it drew the eye eagerly, despite the horrific images depicted on the numerous frescos and friezes.

It was obvious to Hazergal that some portions of the citadel were far older, constructed when Pazuzu, not Pyrak, had ruled from on high. These areas were often shockingly alien, and the murals and bas-reliefs in these rooms were far more primitive. One such mural remained largely intact on what had been the ceiling of a massive domed chapel. It depicted a number of horrendous creatures cavorting and gyrating in the middle of a swirling void of darkness. These beings were unlike any Hazergal had seen in the Abyss, or anywhere else for that matter. Their forms were nearly shapeless masses of tentacles and sensory organs, seemingly random in their composition, but possessing a definite, horrifying outline. He found it hard to focus on these images, as if his mind simply would not process

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such awfulness. Hazergal felt a mounting sense of irrational dread building in him, an instinctual fear that scratched and clawed at the human part of his mind, screaming, "FLEE! RUN!" He was more than a little relieved when Igyx led him away from the blasphemous fane.

Hazergal had only seen the citadel one other time, although being dragged, half-conscious, through its halls by a balor hardly lent itself to sightseeing. He marveled at how large the place was, easily the size of a small city back in the mortal world.

"Igyx," Hazergal called out. "How much farther is it?"

The slimy demon paused, cocked its nightmarish head, and said, "Not far, but the tunnel to Hedrax is guarded."

"Guarded by what?"

"Duke Kynkaros owns the tunnel. He lets Igyx and his pets go through because Igyx gave him the crown from the marilith in the throne room."

Hazergal stopped moving. "Wait, Igyx, stop. Who and what is Duke Kynkaros?"

They were standing in a massive vaulted chamber, one that remained largely intact and allowed for relative freedom of movement. "Kynkaros is a glabrezu. His magic is strong, stronger now with the marilith's crown. He won't like you, you're stronger than he is."

"Oh, undoubtedly," Hazergal sighed. Glabrezu were powerful multi-armed demons, skilled at subterfuge and tempting mortals into corruption. If this one possessed magical ability, Hazergal knew he would be a challenging adversary. Heskera's crown was likely a potent magical item that boosted Kynkaros' spellcasting ability, which only added to the unpredictability of the situation. Also, the glabrezu was likely to have a number of minor demons acting as toadies, bodyguards, and sycophantic hangers-on. They would only complicate matters further.

"How many does Kynkaros command, Igyx?" Hazergal asked.

"He has many pets, "Igyx replied, looking sorrowfully over his dwindled group of dretches. "Many more than Igyx."

"Do you think he will let me pass?"

"Maybe. If you serve him," Igyx said. "But you wouldn't make a very good pet."

"No, I suppose I wouldn't." Hazergal turned a calculating eye upon Igyx, trying to sum up the strange babau's strengths. He was certainly unhinged, but his odd loyalty to his minions, although very strange, was perhaps

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an exploitable quality. Igyx might make a serviceable ally if he could be properly motivated.

"Igyx, will you help me with Kynkaros?" Hazergal asked, stepping closer to the babau. The dretches around Igyx squealed in terror as the former archmage drew near.

"You killed many of Igyx's lovelies," the babau said, his razor thin lips turning down in a pout. "But if Igyx does not help you will kill them all, true?"

Hazergal sighed and smoothed down the feathers on his chest with one taloned hand. He had to win Igyx's loyalty; threats would only take him so far. "If you help me with Kynkaros, I will take you with me once I have *Fiendbleeder*."

"Why would Igyx want to go with you?"

"Because I can give you many more pets, hundreds more," Hazergal said spreading his arms wide for emphasis.

"More pets…" The babau's eyes became distant as he mulled over the offer. The demon's eyes suddenly regained their focus, and Hazergal saw the keen intellect behind those eyes, regardless of its owner's bizarre idiosyncrasies, weighing the advantage. "Igyx will help you, but you must give Igyx and his pets a place to rule."

"Agreed," Hazergal said at once. He could always give Igyx to Gemnez and let the strange demon command the rogue devil's group of babau servitors. The loyalty Igyx seem to be able to engender in lesser demons would likely prove useful at the spawning pits.

"Then Igyx will tell you about Kynkaros and his pets," the babau said, seating himself on a nearby piece of rubble. Immediately, one of his dretches sprang into his lap, like the multiverse's most vile cat, and rumbled contentedly as Igyx stroked its warty hide.

Hazergal remained standing. "Good. Tell me."

"Kynkaros is strong, but not as strong as he thinks he is," Igyx began. "He could kill many of Igyx's pets, but not so many like Igyx."

"How many demons does he command?" Hazergal asked.

"Twenty, maybe more. But most are like my lovelies here," the babau said. "If you can kill Kynkaros, Igyx can handle his pets. Igyx can—," the babau suddenly stopped, his eyes focusing on something across the room.

"What? What is it?" Hazergal asked. Igyx ignored him, stood, gently set the dretch in his lap on the ground, and walked across the room.

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Igyx moved around a large piece of rubble that had fallen from the ceiling when the citadel had crashed into the earth. On the other side of the elephant-sized chunk of masonry, he squatted down, disappearing from view.

Hazergal hurried over to join the babau, curious to see what had the odd demon so enraptured. He found Igyx squatting over the skeletal remains of a demon. Half of the demon – it appeared to be a toad-like hezrou – lay crushed beneath the massive chunk of rubble. But it was not the demon's corpse that had caught Igyx's eye; it was the long, double-edged sword that lay across the slain hezrou's chest, its hilt still gripped by one bony hand.

Igyx reached out and gingerly pried the sword from the dead hezrou's grasp. The weapon was fairly typical of Abyssal smith-work. It was sized for a creature larger than a man, and featured a long, cold iron blade, jagged with serration on both sides. The hilt was not long enough to allow for two-handed use, but the blade certainly looked capable of delivering a very lethal strike.

Igyx 's eyes were clouded and distant as he held the blade before him. "It's been so long since I held a blade…"he whispered. Hazergal noted that the babau's voice had changed, grown deeper, clearer. In addition, he didn't refer to himself in the third person.

There was a charge in the air, a metallic tang of energy that jangled every nerve in Hazergal's body. He had felt this sensation before, when he had made the change from babau to dretch at Gemnez's urging. It was the sledgehammer tolling of fate, the driving force that pushed all beings inexorably toward their destiny. Unfortunately, he had no idea why this strange babau would elicit such a momentous feeling.

Igyx suddenly stepped back and whipped the sword up in a fighting stance. His eyes were all business now, focused, flat, hard. He suddenly began spinning the weapon through a number of attack routines, blurring the blade around his body as if it were an extension of his arm.

Hazergal was no swordsman; his acquaintance with weapons was fleeting at best. In his mortal life he had relied upon his powerful magic to dispatch his foes, leaving him no reason to master any martial discipline. Still, even to *his* untrained eye, he could see that Igyx was a true master with the blade. The babau's body moved with a languid grace – soft, like flowing water, yet each attack routine ended with the iron snap of razored

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perfection. It was a beautiful dichotomy, and one that resonated with Hazergal and reminded him of something, a memory that lurked beneath the chaotic tumult of his half-demonic mind.

Igyx Suddenly halted the sword in mid-swing, and his eyes became cloudy again. I…Igyx…feels strange," he said.

Hazergal stepped close to the babau, looking for anything that might shed some light in the nagging feeling that the babau was somehow familiar. He found nothing. "Let me look at this sword, Igyx."

"Yes, Hazergal, here," The babau handed over the weapon, but Hazergal barely felt the cold metal in his suddenly nerveless fingers. His eyes were wide with shock and surprise.

He had never told the babau his name.

"Igyx, how did you know my name?" Hazergal asked, the slightest hint of fear creeping into his voice. He was suddenly filled with a deep, penetrating sense of disquiet.

"Igyx…I…don't know. It was just there, in my mind," the babau replied, rubbing his temple with one taloned hand. "What is happening?"

Hazergal shook his head. "I don't know. There are forces at work here far beyond my ability to understand."

"What do you mean?" Igyx asked, his eyes searching Hazergal's for some answer to this bizarre connection they suddenly shared.

Hazergal had no intention of divulging his true nature to the babau, no matter how familiar Igyx might seem to him. "It is unimportant," he said. "We have much to do that cannot be accomplished by standing here talking. Let me look closer at this sword you've found."

"Yes, tell Igyx about his sword," the babau urged.

Hazergal noted that the demon had slipped back into referring to himself in the third person. It was almost as if he didn't recognize the name Igyx as his true self. The idea resonated with Hazergal, and something in his memory almost clicked into place. A small portion of the horrific mystery his life had become was almost revealed, but as quickly as the elucidating sensation came over him, it promptly disappeared, leaving him even more confused.

Hazergal shook his head, trying to clear away the shadows of memory that clung to his thoughts. Instead, he focused on the sword in his hand. The weapon bore no sigils or other identifying marks, although he felt the steady undercurrent of magic woven into the iron of the blade. He

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concentrated, pushing a bit of his awareness out at the weapon, and was rewarded with the heady bloom of strong enchantment, as it filled his mind with light and power. He shuddered uncontrollably at the bizarre pleasure of it. He could see every spell, every ounce of magic that had been poured into the weapon, and its abilities were laid bare for him to read like a well-indexed book.

Normally, Hazergal required the use of a simple spell to unlock the magical secrets of an item, but this time it had taken only a small moment of concentration. It was just another facet of the rapidly evolving demonic body he inhabited, which seemed to reveal some new power or ability every day.

The sword Igyx had found was a potent weapon, far too potent to be wielded by a simple hezrou. The toad demon had probably looted it from some half-forgotten treasure vault and then attempted to abscond with it during the confusion caused by the citadel's ungentle landing upon the plains of Vrack. Unfortunately, he had been crushed to death on his way out by falling rubble.

Igyx's sword was empowered with strong magic that enhanced both its balance and the cutting surface of its serrated blade. In addition, a command word, *higrek,* sheathed the blade in an envelope of disruptive sound, powerful enough the shred flesh and crack bone. It was obvious the sword had been designed by demons to kill other demons. The cold iron construction of the blade and the sonic damage it dealt – both specific weaknesses common to demons – were a strong indicator of the weapon's intended use.

Hazergal handed the sword back to Igyx. "It's a potent blade. If there is fighting ahead, say the word *"higrek"* and the blade will prove very effective against our foes."

Igyx smiled, revealing a mouthful of broken, yellowed fangs. "Now if Igyx can find a shield."

Hazergal blinked in surprise. Fighting with a shield was a very uncommon practice among demons, even among those that used weapons on a regular basis. Demons by their very nature were aggressive and impetuous, and although they could become as skilled as any mortal with a blade, they typically fought in only one fashion: recklessly offensive.

"I think I can accommodate that," Hazergal said. He closed his eyes and delved into the limitless depths of arcane energy that filled his half-demon

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mind. There, arrayed neatly like goods in a well-ordered shop, was almost every spell he had cast in his mortal life, and a few he had recently learned. He browsed among them, each spell a separate glowing icon standing out in sharp relief to the shadows of his thoughts and base biological functions. He chose an appropriate spell for the task at hand, a conjuration magic that would allow him to fabricate items out of the ether.

Hazergal rattled off the short arcane syllables to his spell, concentrating on what he wanted to create. The air in front of the demon mage began to swirl, slowly gaining substance and shape. In short order the spell was finished, and Hazergal held a simple, round shield of plain, unadorned steel. It had a central boss so that it could be gripped and held out in front of the body rather than strapped to the arm. He tossed the shield to Igyx, who caught it deftly with his left hand.

Grinning happily, Igyx slid into a fighting stance, with the shield out in front of him, elbow slightly bent. He cocked the sword over his right shoulder and bent his knees. The babau looked like a tightly wound coil, ready to unspring and wreak havoc upon his foes.

"Yes, that is better," Igyx sighed. "Thank you, Hazergal." The demon relaxed his martial pose and moved back to his clutch of dretches. They piled around his feet, mewling happily.

Again Hazergal started at the familiarity with which Igyx now used his name, but let it go in favor of more immediate concerns. "Tell me about Kynkaros' lair. How large is it?"

"It's very large, easily as large as this," Igyx spread his arms, indicating the size of the domed room they now stood in. "He has brought in a large table from one of the other rooms, and he likes to sit there with Ikonia and eat the demons he catches in the ruins. Beneath the table is the tunnel leading to Hedrax."

"Anything else?"

Igyx closed his eyes, and when he reopened them, they glittered with the cold intellect Hazergal had seen earlier. "Yes. The glabrezu has used large pieces of rubble to form a barrier near the entrance of his lair. The gaps between the rubble are small, small enough for a dretch, but not for us. In addition, he has placed magical wards at strategic points to hamper and confuse enemies as they enter."

"I can remove the wards and the rubble," Hazergal said, scratching his chin with one taloned finger. "What else?"

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"Kynkaros commands twenty dretches, although they are not a threat. The true threat is, of course, Kynkaros himself, and his succubus lover, Ikonia. She is a powerful warrior." Igyx's voice was confident, and he rattled off what he knew about Kynkaros like a solider giving a report to a superior officer.

"Have you seen Kynkaros' magic first hand? Is he powerful?" Hazergal asked.

"He is strong enough to bully those that inhabit these ruins. I've seen him kill underlings with fire and ice."

"Very well. I will deal with Kynkaros. You will dispatch the succubus and the dretches." Hazergal issued the order and knew, somehow, that it would be followed.

Igyx nodded. "Yes, that is a sound plan."

"Good, I'm glad you agree," Hazergal said, sarcastically. The whole conversation had sparked more dim feelings of familiarity. His frustration at not being able to identify what was causing these feelings was mounting, and he was looking forward to unleashing some of that aggression on Kynkaros and his brood. "Now come close, and I will prepare you for battle."

Igyx complied immediately, moving to stand near Hazergal. The trust he showed the vrock mage was unnerving. Demons didn't allow powerful spellcasters to target them with magic, even if the caster claimed it was beneficial. Demons did not trust. Period

Hazergal rattled off a number of potent spells, increasing Igyx's already impressive strength, agility, and stamina. In addition, he girded the babau against fire, cold, and electrical attacks. Hazergal also added a powerful defensive enchantment to his own body, proofing him against strikes from weapons, claws, and teeth.

"We are ready. The enchantments will not last long, so we need to take action immediately."

"Yes, my lord. Follow me," Igyx said and moved off down a broken hallway with his dretches in tow.

My lord? Why did he use the honorific? Hazergal wondered. There was no sarcasm in Igyx's voice when he had named the former archmage *lord*. He had meant it. *When this is over, I will puzzle out this mystery*, Hazergal promised himself. But now there were more important things to attend to, and he set off after Igyx and his dretches to do battle.

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Yaghur Hod stared at the headless corpse of his lover where it lay, atop the invalid form of the fallen Hedrenatherax. The human face he wore betrayed no emotion, no grief for the creature that had stood by him for countless millennia. His lips were a hard, flat line, his jaw set and resolute. Only the Archodaemon's eyes—in their cold, limitless depths—spoke of the soul-shredding loss he had suffered. Rage and grief poured from these twin orbs of emptiness, smashing the room and its occupants with the force of the daemon's sorrow.

Gemnez, the bloated architect of Dyzaja's death, stood back from the emotional assault. The Archodaemon's pain was a physical presence, a palpable force that howled in silent fury, tearing at the edge of Gemnez's mind with relentless force.

"Do you know what you have done, devil?" Yaghur Hod asked quietly, his voice a battering ram of grief and rage. "You have taken from me a priceless thing, and I will see you suffer for it."

Gemnez swallowed, his fat, fleshy throat working hard to choke down the bile that suddenly filled his mouth. Never in his eons of existence had he known such terror as now, faced with one of the most potent beings in the multiverse. A being that he had betrayed, insulted, and wounded.

"Why do you wait, my lord," Gemnez managed to croak, his voice choked with fear. "Here I am, practically defenseless against your might. Why do I still draw breath?"

"You are a freak, a hybrid blasphemy that shall soon join the pile of offal you chose to protect."

Gemnez heaved a sigh. "Well then, it seems the accords consider me an archfiend after all."

"What brazen foolishness possessed you to gamble with your existence this way?" Yaghur Hod snapped, his hand clenching around the haft of his scythe. "Why betray me for this?" The Archodaemon gestured to the wrecked body of Hedrenatherax, "this ridiculous excuse for an archfiend."

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Gemnez smiled. "My reasons for *changing* the nature of our agreement have nothing to do with Hedrenatherax, although his death now serves me no purpose."

Yaghur Hod smiled, a mirthless creasing of his human mouth. "You took a great risk, devil. I cannot oppose you here. Now. But it matters little, I still have what I desire." The Archodaemon reached out with one arm and muttered a single, sharp syllable. In response, *Dreadskewer* flew from where it lay next to Hedrenatherax and into Yaghur Hod's waiting hand.

Hedrenatherax watched events unfold from the ground, his mind whirling with implications of what had just happened. Why had Gemnez helped him? What possible advantage could the devil gain from sparing his life? He tried to move, but even the slightest twitch wracked his body with pain. He was healing too slowly, the wounds inflicted from Dyzaja's rapier were proving resistant to even *his* regenerative capability.

Hedrenatherax suddenly realized that Gemnez might have only forestalled his demise. There was a very real possibility that he would simply bleed to death before his body could repair his wounds.

Yaghur Hod's form suddenly blurred, and he was his true self again, the great faceless fiend. He moved to the corpse of Dyzaja, hovering a few inches off the floor to avoid using his lamed leg. He stared down at Hedrenatherax, his black, lusterless eyes seething with malice. "Gemnez has only delayed your fate, demon," he said, his voice issuing from the air around him. "You would have died quickly upon Dyzaja's blade, but now I will see you writhe in torment for a millennia."

Hedrenatherax chuckled, coating his lips with bloody froth. "Maybe, you're right. Maybe I should keep this one's head." He nodded toward the headless corpse of Dyzaja still draped across his body. "Keep it to remind me how close I was to death."

Yaghur Hod's whole body tensed and the air hummed with power, as the Archodaemon's rage gathered into a palpable force. "I would watch my tongue, demon, if I were you."

"Why? Am I not doomed already?" Hedrenatherax asked, still smiling. "Go ahead, finish it. Do what your little tart here couldn't."

"Do not speak of her!" Yaghur Hod suddenly howled. The room shook with his rage.

Hedrenatherax chuckled again, "Or what, you'll kill me? Attack me and violate these accords Gemnez has been blathering about?"

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"No, I will not be tempted into destruction by a guileless oaf such as you," Yaghur Hod said, the flickering flames of rage subsiding in his great, black eyes. "You are a footnote, a whisper in the hurricane of history. That you will be forever linked to my Dyzaja sullies her name and pains me almost as much as her death. You and this fat devil, "Yaghur Hod nodded in Gemnez's direction, "have not only taken her life from me, but violated her very legacy."

Yaghur Hod transferred *Dreadskewer* to his right hand, holding both the spear and his scythe in a single powerful grip. He then knelt down and placed one long-fingered hand upon the corpse of Dyzaja. He gently stroked the bruised purple flesh, and again the room overflowed with his pain. Hedrenatherax, so close to the Archodaemon, gasped as a tide of alien sorrow filled every particle of his being.

"No. No. STOP!" the demon lord cried, thrashing his head back and forth as Yaghur Hod's grief overwhelmed his senses. The pain was immeasurable, a gulf of emptiness that rose up in silent waves to batter the demon lord's psyche. He had never experienced such emotions, for the large part his demonic mind was incapable of them, and the raw, undiluted force of Yaghur Hod's pain now wracked him with a torment he had never thought possible.

"This is just a taste, demon lord, of things to come," Yaghur Hod said quietly. You have felt my pain, but it is only a mild wind compared to the storm of torment I will visit upon you and all who ally themselves with you. This I promise to the both of you," the Archodaemon turned to look at Gemnez. "Do you hear me, devil?"

Gemnez nodded grimly. "Yes, my lord. There will be a reckoning for this day. Of that I have no doubt."

"Then prepare yourselves. For when we meet again, I will claim what is mine," Yaghur Hod proclaimed, and then disappeared with a faint hiss of arcane energy. The corpse of Dyzaja disappeared as well, leaving Gemnez and Hedrenatherax in a room full of death and silence.

Gemnez sighed audibly, and moved to stand over Hedrenatherax. He looked down at the stricken demon lord, who was now shaking with great, racking sobs. A trail of crimson tears stained each scaled cheek, and the great fiend's eyes were wide with horror and confusion.

"What has he *done* to me!?" Hedrenatherax howled through his sobs. "I don't understand…"

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"I'm not surprised. I dare say you are experiencing something no demon has experienced in thousands of years," Gemnez said, smiling.

"I don't *UNDERSTAND*!" Hedrenatherax howled again. "It hurts. Is this death?"

Gemnez threw his head back and laughed. "Oh no, my dear demon, this is not death. This is sorrow. This is grief. This is loss. All things your kind – and most of mine, for that matter – are unable to experience. All of these – emotions, I suppose mortals would call them – require that you care about something or someone else more than you care for yourself. What demon or devil can claim that?"

"Kill me, Gemnez," Hedrenatherax begged. "I can't stand this."

"Oh, don't worry," Gemnez said, kneeling down next to the stricken demon lord. "These aren't your emotions, demon. Your mind was weak enough for Yaghur Hod to infect you with his own pain. I am sure this will pass."

Hedrenatherax responded only with a low moan of absolute emotional agony. "I can see her in my mind, and what she was to him," he croaked. "How can he bear to be attached to another being in this way?"

Gemnez's eyes softened. "I don't know. He is an ancient and powerful creature, and his mind is as inscrutable as his actions. These emotions you are experiencing have long since been purged from *our* races, but Yaghur Hod is so old that he must still retain them."

"It is horrific," Hedrenatherax said through clenched teeth.

"Well, despite that, we must leave here as soon as possible. Yaghur Hod cannot oppose us for the moment, but I am sure he is rallying what servants remain to him" Gemnez said, his eyes moving to the only egress in the cavernous audience chamber. "Can you walk?"

"I…don't know," Hedrenatherax managed to gasp through clenched teeth. "Why didn't you let Dyzaja kill me?"

Gemnez bent close to Hedrenatherax, examining his wounds. "You're healing, but her blade was cold iron, which has slowed your natural regeneration."

"Why did you help me, Gemnez?" Hedrenatherax asked again. His voice was edged with a hint of the old, tireless rage. "I do not wish to be another pawn in one of your convoluted schemes, toad."

"As much as I am loathe to admit it, I am going to need every ally I can muster in the near future. Even one so oafish as you." Gemnez conceded

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with a sigh. "I should have guessed why Yaghur Hod wanted *Dreadskewer*, but unfortunately, I was blinded by ambition for another purpose."

With a groan, Hedrenatherax sat up. His sobs had tailed off, as whatever emotion Yaghur Hod infected him with began to dissipate. "Why would I choose to ally myself with a creature that betrayed me earlier this very day?" he asked.

"You really have no idea what just transpired, do you?" Gemnez asked with a snort. "Yaghur Hod commands power, even in his weakened state, that rivals the might of the most powerful demon lords and archdevils. If what he says is true, and he has secreted a portion of his former power into *Dreadskewer, Fiendbleeder,* and his scythe *Blightrazor*, and if he manages to obtain all three, then the multiverse is in dire peril."

"That is ridiculous." Hedrenatherax snorted, and climbed shakily to his feet. His legs buckled almost immediately, and he collapsed back to the ground with a pained grunt.

Gemnez rolled his eyes, and moved to assist Hedrenatherax, lifting the massive fiend from the floor like a child might snatch up a doll. The prideful demon lord fought him at first, but then relented and allowed Gemnez to help support his bulk. "I will try to explain, but we must leave here."

"Fine. We are thirty floors up, toad. Can you carry me that far?"

"On my back, if need be," Gemnez said. "We can teleport away as soon as we leave the tower."

The two fiends threaded their way slowly through the shattered corpses of the fiends Hedrenatherax had slain earlier. They reached the looming stone doors the led to a small landing, passed through, and began the arduous descent down the spiral staircase that wound down the massive tower like a great, skeletal serpent.

Gemnez spoke as he and Hedrenatherax hobbled down the stairs. "Like it or not, you and I must become allies," he began. "The threat that Yaghur Hod represents should he obtain what he seeks is beyond anything this multiverse has seen in the last ten thousand years."

"Again, toad, this is ridiculous. He is one fiend, alone, without even a servant to wipe his ass, let alone the number of minions required for what you are implying," Hedrenatherax said incredulously. "There is no doubt that he is powerful, but what you are implying is beyond idiocy."

"No! He is more than that!" Gemnez barked into Hedrenatherax's ear. "He is an embodiment of true evil, not this petty wickedness our races

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have played at for millennia. Yaghur Hod was birthed in a time when the concepts of law and chaos were mere afterthoughts to the two opposing forces in the multiverse."

"So, he's still only one fiend. Powerful, yes, but how does he pose a threat so dire that you would consider betraying him, and then sink so low as to ally yourself with me?" Hedrenatherax asked, his tone mocking.

"Great Asmodeus' gonads! You *are* dense!" Gemnez spat. "Listen to me. Yaghur Hod is an elemental force, a primary foundation of the multiverse. Before he was defeated and imprisoned by the guardinal lord Auriliach, Yaghur Hod commanded power that not even the gods can now claim."

"That doesn't make sense, devil." Hedrenatherax said. "How could Yaghur Hod be more powerful than a god?"

"Simple. What are gods but the ultimate pinnacle of mortal power? Even you and I started out as mortals. Our mortal lives upon the Prime Material Plane have dictated what forms we now wear, and if either of us were to obtain godhood – an unlikely event, especially in your case – we would still be beholden to that cycle of existence, and its limitations. Yaghur Hod and Auriliach predate mortals, and their power is not restricted in the same way. Both represent opposing primal forces – what mortals would call good and evil. But labeling these beings and what they stand for with such childish designations does not do them justice. They are far simpler in design. Yaghur Hod is destruction personified, the end of all things, while Auriliach is life, genesis, preservation."

The two fiends reached another landing, and stopped momentarily to rest. Hedrenatherax breathed heavily and leaned against a wall to support his battered body. His wounds burned like they had been filled with acid, and the demon lord could feel their acrid sting with each step.

"Why would Yaghur Hod divide his power, and place it within these weapons?" Hedrenatherax asked.

"Perhaps he feared that he would not emerge victorious in his confrontation with Auriliach," Gemnez answered. "Although I think it is more likely that he overestimated his opponent's strength, and by splitting his personal power into *Fiendbleeder* and *Dreadskewer,* he facilitated his own defeat and imprisonment."

"He has *Dreadskewer* now, what if he obtained *Fiendbleeder?*" Hedrenatherax asked.

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"Then he would be complete, and no force in the multiverse could stand against him."

Hedrenatherax scratched his scaly chin with the point of his scythe arm, his eyes deep in thought. "What of this Auriliach? Surely he would oppose his ancient enemy."

"I'm glad to see you've listened to some of what I've said," Gemnez said, sarcastically, "But Auriliach sacrificed much of his power to overcome and imprison Yaghur Hod. He is not the same creature he was when he did battle with the Archodaemon so many eons ago. Yaghur Hod would crush him, and all of the guardinal lords along with him."

"And this is why you spared me and slew Dyzaja?" Hedrenatherax asked.

"Yaghur Hod even now, with only two of the artifacts containing portions of his power, is likely strong enough to defeat any being in the multiverse. In addition, I fear that he will call all manner of powerful creatures to his banner, ancient things that have slumbered for eons in the primal darkness of Hades." Gemnez stared hard at Hedrenatherax. "By killing Dyzaja I removed a capable lieutenant from Yaghur Hod's fold, and added your strength, meager as it might be, to the forces I hope to rally against him."

"And why would I help you, toad? It was you that was set to betray me to Yaghur Hod in the first place."

Gemnez sighed and placed one hand upon his forehead in a very feminine display of frustration. "Yes, I know, I was a fool not to have seen what Yaghur Hod wanted with *Dreadskewer.* And now I have unwittingly placed you, me, and everything in dire jeopardy." The fat devil smiled weakly. "Not even I can see all the threads of this tangled skein."

Hedrenatherax pushed himself away from the wall he was leaning against, and stood. The majority of the wounds he had suffered in his duel with Dyzaja had begun to heal, and his strength was returning. "We should keep moving."

"Agreed," Gemnez said, and started down the stairs again.

"You still have not explained why I should not remove your head from your shoulders for your betrayal, or more to the point, why I should help you oppose Yaghur Hod." Hedrenatherax said, moving to follow Gemnez.

"You have not puzzled this out yet?" Gemnez sighed, exasperation tingeing the question. "Then listen closely. The natural opposing force to

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Yaghur Hod and what he represents is impotent and weak. Auriliach does not have the strength to stop him, and once the Archodaemon is whole again, he will ravage Elysium for vengeance and then turn on the rest of the multiverse. Yaghur Hod means to rule every plane of existence, and this includes the Abyss and your own petty demesne."

"Surely he cannot thwart the combined might of Hell and the Abyss?" Hedrenatherax scoffed.

"And why not? Devil and demon would never unite to oppose him."

"Yes, but where would he amass the force necessary to even contemplate such conquest?" Hedrenatherax asked.

"Both Hades and Gehenna teem with daemons. And although they have forgotten their true master and much of their own history, they will flock to Yaghur Hod's banner when he reveals himself. Now that he has *Dreadskewer,* Yaghur Hod will be on his way to Gehenna to remove Ozynthraxus as Archodaemon. Then he will command an army of fiends large enough to accomplish his next goal."

"And what is that?"

"He will seek out *Fiendbleeder* to complete the revival of his former power." Gemnez answered simply.

Hedrenatherax stopped his downward descent along Har'Drok's twisting stairs, and his eyes grew large. Gemnez turned to look at the demon lord, his face blooming in a garish, red-lipped grin.

"Yes, now you finally understand." Gemnez said, clasping his meaty hands together and smiling. "Yaghur Hod will soon be leading a horde of daemons to your front door."

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Hazergal stared down a long hallway choked with rubble and debris. At the end of the hallway, he could see the doorway of a large room. Beyond it, a vast, cavernous darkness yawned, like the hungry maw of some colossal beast. From out this tenebrous vault drifted the guttural language of the Abyss, spoken in two very distinct voices. The first was a gurgling grunt, a thick, malformed utterance that smote the ears of the vrock mage and his babau ally with its coarseness. The second voice, although scarred somewhat by the nasty syllables of the Abyssal tongue, was a silken purr, a whisper of tempting delight that rang like a sledgehammer against the contrasting ugliness of the first voice.

"That must be Kynkaros and Ikonia," Hazergal said quietly to the babau beside him.

Igyx nodded, and turned to the five dretches behind him. The small demons huddled together in a sagging lump, shaking with terror. "Do not worry my pets, Igyx will return soon." The tall gangly demon then bent down and caressed each dretch gently, eliciting a chorus of soft, satisfied mewling from the tiny fiends.

Hazergal strained to make out what Kynkaros and his lieutenant were saying, but their voices were far enough away that he could not make out distinct words. Of course a very simple spell would allow him to hear the demons with perfect clarity, but he feared the words of his incantation, or the eldritch energies of the spell itself, might alert the two fiends to his presence. Fortunately the voices had grown shrill and urgent. It sounded as if Kynkaros and Ikonia might be arguing, which he hoped would leave them unprepared for the confrontation to come.

It was easily thirty yards from where Hazergal and Igyx stood to the entrance of Kynkaros' lair, and the path, cluttered with rubble and debris, was not one easily traversed in silence.

"Igyx, can you reach the doorway quietly?" Hazergal asked softly.

"Yes," Igyx answered. "They are fighting again. And Igyx is very quiet." The babau grinned wolfishly, and then began moving slowly forward, picking his way between the fallen chunks of masonry that littered the hallway.

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Hazergal watched Igyx choose his way through the debris, and then followed ten yards behind, trying to keep his taloned feet on the exact path the babau had taken before him. Hazergal did not consider himself particularly stealthy. In his mortal life he'd had little use for creeping up upon his enemies, and on the few occasions when such furtive action was called for, he simply masked his presence with magic. Now, however, he discovered that his demonic body's superhuman agility made it much easier to move quietly. Still, he was no match for Igyx, who flitted between and over the rubble in his path like a dancing ghost, silent and nearly invisible.

As he neared the doorway, it became easier to make out just what Kynkaros and Ikonia were arguing about. Hazergal had to stifle a chuckle when it became apparent that their dispute stemmed not over some cosmic act of chaos and evil, but rather a disagreement about what manner of minor demon they were going to dine on.

"…Kyn, quasits taste like sewage! I'm not eating another of those disgusting, little winged vermin!" a female voice protested vociferously.

"But we need the dretches to patrol the ruins. I can't sacrifice another one just so you can indulge your fancy for dretch livers." The deep, ugly resonance of Kynkaros was tinged with exasperation.

The two demons seemed very involved in their argument, and the tenor of their voices did not change as Igyx reached the large doorway leading to the chamber beyond. Hazergal joined the babau a few moments later, and they both stood and stared into the gloom ahead. The darkness was not natural in nature, Hazergal surmised immediately. His demonic vision could pierce any normal darkness with ease. The smothering gloom ahead hung in a greasy, almost tangible shroud, and Hazergal could feel the potent magical energy coming off it in waves.

Obviously unaware of the intruders in their domain, Kynkaros and Ikonia continued to argue.

"Look, there's that babau that uses the tunnel occasionally. You could eat that," Kynkaros said. "He shouldn't be too hard to catch."

"Ugh, babau are so sticky," Ikonia complained. "But its better than eating another quasit, and it certainly can't be worse than eating that hezrou we captured a few days ago." Hazergal could hear the succubus shudder in revulsion.

I'm going to dispel this darkness in a few seconds, Hazergal thought at Igyx, using the telepathy innate to all demon-kind. *When that happens, stay here.*

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I'll still need to nullify any wards Kynkaros as has placed near the entrance.

Igyx gripped his sword tightly, and moved his shield into position in front of his body. *Igyx understands,* he thought back at Hazergal.

Hazergal reached out with his senses, just as he had done with the sword he and Igyx had found earlier. He saw the crisscrossing lines of magical force that shielded the first ten yards of the room beyond in his mind's eye. Like spider webs of arcane light, they tangled in the air, each laden with deadly magical energy.

Get ready, Hazergal thought to Igyx. He then reached out with one taloned hand and uttered a short – and very loud – string of guttural syllables. The air hummed with the released spell energy and suddenly the darkness ahead disappeared, revealing the cavernous expanse of Kynkaros' lair. The room was vast and surprisingly clean. Like all the rooms in the ruined citadel, it lay upon its side, creating a longer room with a shorter ceiling, rather than the vault-like expanse it was intended to be.

Just as Igyx had said, the first twenty feet of the room were blocked by massive pieces of rubble. Beyond this, set back against the far wall, stood a massive ornate table, sized for an incredibly large creature and stained with all manner of ichor, blood, and other fluids – leavings of past meals. An ornate, high-backed chair was placed at the head of this table, and in it rested the hulking shape of Kynkaros.

Kynkaros was an ordinary glabrezu in appearance, a huge fiend, twenty feet tall, with a bestial, vaguely canine head and two sets of arms. The first set of arms jutted from the glabrezu's shoulders, and were appropriately sized for his frame. These massive limbs each ended in a huge, pincered claw, easily capable of snapping an ogre in half. The second set of arms thrust out from Kynkaros' chest, and these were small, human-like, and possessed long-fingered hands for delicate manipulation. The only thing about Kynkaros that differed from any other demon of his kind was the ridiculously small, jeweled tiara that rested atop his mammoth head.

Sitting at the other end of the table was Ikonia, and she was not what Hazergal had expected. Succubi were universally beautiful creatures – by mortal standards – with flawless skin, curvaceous bodies, and visages that could awaken desire in a statue. Ikonia, on the other hand, was a sagging, doughy wreck of a demon. She was fat beyond measure, her human-like frame supporting easily 400 pounds of extra muscle and blubber. Her face was a bulbous melon of pallid flesh, yet somehow still alluring. Her eyes,

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small and beady, were fixed upon Hazergal and Igyx, and her fleshy lips were parted in a shockingly feminine "O" of surprise.

The two bizarre demons at the table were surrounded by a small hoard of dretches, lounging on the floor or squabbling over chunks of unidentifiable meat in the corners of the room. They too turned to look at the two interlopers into their masters' domain, small fanged mouths lolling open in hunger.

Hazergal did not wait for his enemies to recover from his surprise entry. He smashed the path ahead with a shuddering line of concussive force. The spell shredded three surprised dretches huddling close to the doorway, reducing the small fiends to ichor-stained ruin. This, however, was not the purpose of the spell. It's true intent was to remove the rubble blocking the entrance and to set off the wards beyond. The spell accomplished both tasks admirably, smashing the chunks of fallen masonry into gravel and triggering Kynkaros' wards in a mighty explosion of fire, frost, and acid.

The detonating wards threw up a cloud of smoke and dust, obfuscating Hazergal and Igyx as they charged into the room.

Igyx moved ahead of Hazergal and shouted, "Higrek!" activating the magical properties of his sword, which was immediately sheathed in a buzzing envelope of sonic force. A group of dretches lay ahead of the charging demon, but instead of laying into the small demons with his weapon, Igyx simply cooed to them quietly in his sickening Abyssal baby talk.

Hazergal was about to curse Igyx for his stupidity, but to the vrock mage's surprise, the dretches responded to Igyx in a truly unexpected fashion. All of the dretches in the room suddenly swarmed around the babau's feet excitedly, mewling happily as he paused for an instance to scratch one of their misshapen heads. Then, after a gentle command from Igyx, the dretches left Kynkaros' lair *en masse*.

The smoke from the wards had now cleared, and Hazergal, Kynkaros, and Ikonia watched the dretches leave the room with open-mouthed stares. Hazergal heard the dretches out in the corridor babbling happily as they met up with the ones Igyx had left behind.

The shock of the dretch exodus passed in a heartbeat, and Kynkaros surged to his feet, followed by his lover, Ikonia. "How dare you invade my sanctuary, vrock!" he bellowed. "You will pay with your lives for disturbing the peace of my domain."

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Ikonia reached down and grasped a massive two-handed axe – more a meat cleaver, really – from where it rested beside her chair. "Save some for me love," she said, and began to move across the floor toward Igyx. "Vrocks are very tasty."

Hazergal did not waste any time with a reply to Kynkaros, and rattled off the choked syllables of spell. Hazergal saw Kynkaros' eyes widen in recognition, and the glabrezu spat out a frenzied string of arcane words himself in an attempt to block Hazergal's enchantment. The former archmage's spell hammered through Kynkaros' feeble attempt at a dispelling, and the glabrezu was knocked form his feet by a massive, disembodied hand that suddenly appeared before him.

Igyx had moved to intercept Ikonia, shifting into a fluid fighting stance as the massive succubus drew near. Ikonia was much shorter than Igyx but outweighed him by several hundred pounds. The rotund demoness loosed a howl of rage, and likely hunger, as she charged forward with her axe, leveling a simple, yet powerful overhand blow at her opponent. Igyx interposed his shield between himself and the descending axe with a languid, casual movement, deflecting the axe harmlessly to the side.

Ikonia's strike left her momentarily off balance, and before she could recover, Igyx stepped forward past her guard and drove his fist, weighted with the hilt of his sword, into her pudgy face. The blow was not terribly hard, but off balance as she was, it snapped Ikonia's head back, and tangled her legs beneath her. The massive succubus sat down hard on her immense posterior with a loud "Ooph!"

Hazergal meanwhile continued to drive Kynkaros, who had now regained his feet, back against the wall with repeated blows from the disembodied fist he had summoned. Hazergal took a step forward each time he telepathically commanded the fist to strike the glabrezu, and was now within fifty feet of the besieged Kynkaros.

Hazergal snuck a glance over at Igyx and Ikonia and saw the babau advancing towards the sprawling succubus. For a moment he thought the battle would be won easily, and then Kynkaros suddenly avoided another blow from Hazergal's forceful hand spell, and loosed an evocation of his own.

Hazergal suddenly realized that the glabrezu had been luring him forward into range for his own attack spell. The vrock mage could do little but stare hopelessly at the multicolored rays of light that sprang

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from Kynkaros' outstretched fingers as they lanced towards him. Still, he wrenched his body to the side, in a vain attempt to avoid the radiant beams, and was again surprised at the nimbleness of his demon body. He managed to evade all but a single, orange-hued shaft, which struck him in the back as he whirled away from the rest of the prismatic spray.

Searing pain lanced through Hazergal's body as the orange ray coalesced into a splatter of acidic fluid. His demonic body was tough, and the acid didn't burn him the way it would a human, but the pain was intense, and the acrid stench of his own burning flesh was more than a little disconcerting. Hazergal, however, did not let the pain ruin his concentration, and seconds after Kynkaros' arcane assault, he fired off his own colorful display.

Hazergal chose his spell from the unending cornucopia of magical energy that coursed through his brain, and spewed the words of power out like a vehement curse. The spell took shape in the form of a glowing multicolored wall, which sprang into being, from floor to ceiling and wall to wall, behind Kynkaros. The shimmering bulwark of magical energy was composed of striated bands in the same hues as Kynkaros' rays of light.

Kynkaros' smiled, mockingly, thinking that Hazergal had targeted his spell poorly, and began to speak the words of another powerful spell. Hazergal did not give him time to finish. Instead, he barked a single, short phrase, the completion trigger for a spell he had condensed into a more alacritous form. In response, a wave of telekinetic force struck Kynkaros and sent him staggering backwards – directly into and through the magical wall. Kynkaros shrieked in horror and pain as the bands of colored light released their energy, inflicting eight different varieties of arcane hell upon his flesh.

Hazergal doubted the spell had killed Kynkaros, as many of the prismatic wall's effects would not harm the resilient body of a demon. The vrock mage charged forward to finish Kynkaros, who was now behind the wall and out of sight. Hazergal glanced over his shoulder as he moved and saw that Ikonia had regained her feet and was frantically attempting to pierce Igyx's defenses with her axe.

Igyx caught each blow of the fat succubus' weapon on his shield or harmlessly deflected it with a contemptuous flick of his sword. The babau had not yet taken the offensive, and was grinning like a child loosed in a candy shop. Ikonia countered Igyx's cheerful silence with a chorus of curses, growls, and slobbering screams, as each of her attacks failed to find the mark.

Seeing that Igyx had things well in hand, Hazergal sprinted that last

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forty feet to the edge of his conjured wall. He stopped before the great shimmering curtain of color, and listened. Immediately he heard Kynkaros mumbling frantically, although he could not make out any words from the steady stream of gibberish.

Hazergal dismissed the prismatic wall with a wave of one hand and a subtle push of magical energy. Once the wall disappeared, he saw Kynkaros, huddled beneath his table, his massive pincered arms wrapped around his body. The great demon was rocking back and forth, mumbling and making useless, pseudo-arcane symbols in the air with his second, smaller set of arms.

Hazergal chuckled to himself at the sight of the mighty glabrezu reduced to such a state. The glabrezu's apparent insanity was no mystery to the vrock mage; one of the colored bands of light that made up the prismatic wall placed a dire curse upon anyone that passed through it, causing indefinite insanity and a loss of all mental faculties. Hazergal cast a glance back over his shoulder to see how Igyx was fairing with Ikonia, and was just in time to see the gory end of the battle.

Ikonia, apparently unaware that her master had been neutralized, fought like some impossibly rotund berserker, raining blows upon Igyx with her axe. For some time the babau had simply avoided or deflected her attacks, allowing her to slowly tire. Now, near exhaustion, Ikonia's strikes had slowed. As she raised her great axe for one more mammoth, flesh-jiggling blow, Igyx moved forward in a blur, and drove his blade into her body, right between the succubus' great pendulous breasts.

Ikonia gasped as the blade passed completely through her, its point bursting from her back in a spray of blood. Her axe clattered uselessly to the stone floor, and she sagged to the ground in a great avalanche of pale, doughy flesh.

Igyx pulled his blade from Ikonia's corpse with a flourish and then struck off her head with a single, precise strike. "Igyx will see who is eating whom now, fat one," he said venomously as he shook the blood from his blade. "Igyx's pets will eat well for months."

With the only other threat in the room eliminated, Hazergal turned back to Kynkaros. He moved up to the table, squatted down, and grasped Kynkaros by the ankle with one taloned hand. The glabrezu was huge, and it took every ounce of Hazergal's strength to drag the massive demon from beneath the table.

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Kynkaros did not struggle, and simply fell upon his back and let the vrock drag him from his sanctuary. He stared up at Hazergal with glazed, sightless eyes, still mumbling and waving his hands impotently.

Hazergal looked down upon the helpless demon and felt something primal stir within him, a slow, hungry energy he had felt twice before. Horror raced through his mind as Hazergal realized what was about to happen, but as before, the solid, implacable hand of fate pushed him face-first into his destiny.

The force that guided his body now was not his own, and Hazergal watched events unfold through the windows of his demonic eyes, powerless to halt the blasphemous course that lay before him.

Igyx watched curiously as Hazergal fell upon the body of Kynkaros, clutch the glabrezu's head with both taloned hands, and open his mouth wide. The babau thought Hazergal meant to simply rip Kynkaros' face away with his great, sharp beak, but instead he simply drew in a great ragged breath. The helpless glabrezu loosed a terrible, agony-filled screech, and Igyx saw a bluish vapor rise up from Kynkaros' mouth to be drawn in by Hazergal's great sucking breath.

Kynkaros screams went on as Hazergal continued to draw his essence from him with each gasping breath. The vrock mage had begun to glow with a strange azure radiance, which only grew stronger with each sucking inhalation. Finally, Kynkaros stopped screaming, and his body was limp and lifeless. Hazergal rolled off of the dead glabrezu and stood, his body pulsing with the strange blue witch fire.

Igyx took a step back, away from the bizarre spectacle. "Hazergal, what is happening? What have you done to Kynkaros?"

Hazergal responded by throwing his head back and loosing a great, shattering scream. He then fell to his knees, his body suddenly alive and twitching with fell energy. The vrock mage's plumage fell from his body all at once in a cloud of steel-gray feathers, leaving a writhing, naked thing on the stone floor.

The room was suddenly filled with a riot of liquid, organic sounds, as Hazergal's skin sloughed away revealing raw muscle and bone beneath. This gave way the grinding chorus of popping joints, as bones worked free from their fleshy prison and grew in both thickness and length. Muscle, veins, and other tissue flowed like melted wax to cover these newly birthed protrusions, coating infant appendages in the vital fiber of life and locomotion.

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The changes being wrought upon Hazergal's body quickened, and Igyx could now see the definite purpose the archmage's flesh was straining toward. Two massive legs now supported Hazergal's rapidly thickening torso, while long multi-jointed arms ending in barbed pincers unfurled from each shoulder like a questing frond reaching for the sun. A second set of appendages slowly protruded from the archmage's expanding chest, thickening and gaining in definition, adding a second set of fully functional arms.

The most telling vestige of Hazergal's vrock body, his avian head, was one of the last things to change. The great, curved beak melted away and was replaced by a thick canine muzzle, a grinning maw filled with ivory fangs. Finally, slick, black skin grew like spreading fungus from a central point on Hazergal's chest, and then raced across his body, coating his new flesh in an iron-hard integument.

And then it was done. The eldritch blue energy faded away, and the room was left in silence.

Hazergal drew the first breath into his glabrezu lungs, and turned his savage, canine face to where Igyx stood in mute awe. He smiled, reveling in the heady strength of his new form and the towering height it commanded.

"Hazergal, is that you?" Igyx asked. The babau held gripped his sword tightly, and held his shield out in front of his body.

"I had become quite fond of flying," Hazergal said, still smiling. He clashed the great pincers together that capped his largest limbs, and then chuckled. "But I suppose this will do in a pinch."

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Gemnez pushed open the great iron doors of Har'Drok and stared out over the empty gloom of Hades. The endless expanse of craggy hills and gullies was a welcome sight, despite the oppressive gray light of the sunless sky.

"Get out of my way, toad," Hedrenatherax growled from behind the bloated devil.

Gemnez stood aside and let the bulky demon lord pass. Hedrenatherax had recovered from the majority of his wounds, and had become his cheerless, rage-filled self again. Doubtless, his mood was not improved by the fact that Gemnez had earlier saved his life, a shameful turn of events that wounded the haughty demon lord immensely. In addition, Hedrenatherax now had no choice but to ally himself with the rogue devil and accept Gemnez as an equal rather than a barely tolerated servant.

"Of course, *my lord*," Gemnez said as Hedrenatherax shoved past him. The rogue devil could not resist tweaking the demon lord's pride just a little.

Hedrenatherax stalked out a few yards from the tower doors, and stood in silence for a moment. His bestial, tusked face crinkled in concentration, and then he frowned deeply and turned back to Gemnez. "Well, toad. I cannot teleport way from this miserable place. I thought you said we could leave once we were free of the tower."

Gemnez waddled up to stand next to the demon lord. "Perhaps the power of the accords extends a bit beyond the tower," he said with a shrug. "We shall have to walk a bit and find out."

Hedrenatherax growled and spat in response, but began moving north away from the tower. Gemnez unwound his spiked chain from around his massive waist and held it ready. He then followed behind Hedrenatherax.

North was the only possible direction the two fiends could travel. The tower of Har'Drok looked out over a black, bottomless chasm to the south, east, and west. It stood precariously upon a short finger of rock jutting over the edge of the dark hole in the landscape.

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The two fiends walked for a few moments in silence, cresting a small hill above a shallow valley. Below, swarming like angry ants were easily two hundred minor daemons, mostly cryptodaemons, but Gemnez counted a few azodaemons and cacodaemons in their number. They were fanned out along the valley floor in a ragged line, obviously waiting for Gemnez and Hedrenatherax to arrive.

"Well, I think we can now ascertain how far the dampening magic of the accords extends," Gemnez said, smiling weakly.

Hedrenatherax trained a glare of pure hatred upon the devil, and ground his tusks together in rage. "*Now what, toad?*" he managed to growl between clenched teeth. "I should slaughter you for this. For leading me into this trap."

Gemnez frowned and jabbed one fat sausage-like finger at Hedrenatherax. "Oh, will you try thinking for once in your pitiful existence!" he shouted. "I could have easily let Dyzaja slay you and thrown my lot in with Yaghur Hod back in his audience chamber, if I wanted to simply be rid of you. If you want to survive the next few minutes, then I suggest you dispense with the imperious rage and get used to the idea that the whole, gods-be-damned multiverse does not revolve around you!"

Hedrenatherax blinked in surprise and took a step back from the enraged devil. Then he started to chuckle, low and throaty, and his face split in a massive, fanged smile. "You know, Gemnez, that is the first time I have ever seen you really angry," he said, still chuckling. "I must admit, toad, I like you better this way."

Gemnez smiled, and shook his head. "Yes, well, you truly are one of the most infuriating creatures I have ever had the misfortune to encounter."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Hedrenatherax replied. "Now how do you propose we get past all of those little maggots down there?"

Gemnez placed his fat hands upon his hips and stared down into the valley. "Well, they are obviously waiting for us to come to them. Probably because they have been ordered to guard the boundary of the accord magic that keeps us from teleporting away."

"Couldn't you just fly us over the whole lot?" Hedrenatherax asked.

"I could certainly carry both of us, but I would be unable to maneuver with such a heavy load, or fight off the azodaemons that would surly swarm us once we were aloft." Gemnez pointed to where a small group of the winged daemons huddled.

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Hedrenatherax frowned. "What about a simple frontal assault. All we would need to do is break through their line and get beyond the boundary of the accord magic. I doubt that mob below could organize itself quickly enough to keep us from breaking through their line."

"Hmm," Gemnez mused, idly scratching his belly. "That idea actually does have some merit, simple though it is, but there are some factors we must consider."

"Such as?"

"First of all, the cryptodaemons will attack en masse, and although they are individually weak, there are enough of them to swamp us and slow us down. The cacodaemons will certainly assault us with spells, and again, the effect is not to slay us but to slow us down."

"A battle of attrition then," Hedrenatherax said. "They would eventually weaken us enough to slay us."

"Correct," Gemnez said. "And the azodaemons will ensure we do not escape into the air, and will certainly harry us from above."

"Then how do we get past them?

"What magic do you have at your disposal?" Gemnez asked in response.

Hedrenatherax looked away, and Gemnez was surprised to see shame in the great demon's face. "Not much," he muttered. "I have already exhausted the most potent magic I command."

Gemnez blinked in surprise. Most archfiends commanded an arsenal of magical abilities that rivaled the most ardent wizard. In his transformation from balor to demon lord, Hedrenatherax had somehow been left without a very potent weapon

"Very well, I have a few spells that can assist us. Before we engage the cryptodaemon line, I will attempt to disrupt the cacodaemons' spellcasting." Gemnez glanced down to the valley below where a group of the six crocodile-headed daemons stood. "At least, the fools have clumped together for me," he muttered. "Once the cacodaemons are distracted, you will charge forward, and attempt to punch a hole in the cryptodaemon line. I will follow after and keep the daemons from swarming you." Gemnez hefted the razored length of his chain purposefully.

"That's not much of a plan, toad" Hedrenatherax said skeptically. "But it will have to do."

"Very well. Are you ready?" Gemnez asked.

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Hedrenatherax nodded and swung his scythe arm around to loosen the muscles that had tightened from his recent injuries. "Let's get this over with."

Gemnez waddled a few paces down the hill to stand within two hundred yards of the small army of fiends below. In response, the cryptodaemons formed themselves into two ragged lines some fifty yards in length across the valley floor. The cacodaemons began waving their hands in intricate arcane gestures, and their croaking voices filled the gloomy Hades air with chanting. Gemnez did not allow the scaly fiends to finish their spells unmolested.

The fat devil raised one of his flabby arms and spat forth the dire words of a fiery evocation. A shimmering ball of vivid blue flame raced from his outstretched arm to impact the group of chanting cacodaemons, immolating the fiends in viridian fire. Daemons have some resistance to fire, and Gemnez's spell did not injure them greatly, although it did disrupt the scaly fiends' concentration enough to thwart spellcasting for the moment.

"Now, Hedrenatherax!" Gemnez cried, then launched another glob of fire at the already singed cacodaemons.

At Gemnez's signal, Hedrenatherax charged down the hill towards the line of insect-like cryptodaemons. Each of the man-sized fiends gripped a cold iron long dagger in all four of its clawed hands. Cryptodaemons were usually employed as spies and assassins, and their expertise was in stealthy skullduggery, not open warfare. But for the moment, they were the only type of daemon Yaghur Hod had been able to summon in great numbers. Their inexperience with battlefield tactics was evident as Hedrenatherax bore down on them, with Gemnez following close behind. Instead of tightening their ranks and presenting a solid front to the charging demon lord, their line bowed in the middle, and Hedrenatherax struck the retreating cryptodaemons like a battering ram.

Howling and slashing madly with his scythe arm, Hedrenatherax mowed through the first rank of cryptodaemons like a whirlwind of teeth, shredding their insectoid bodies in sprays of tar-like ichor. Gemnez followed behind the demon lord through the breach, smiting foes with his spiked chain and engineering even more chaos in their rapidly disintegrating line.

The cryptodaemons slashed at the two massive fiends with their long daggers, but their weapons simply could not pierce the scaly integument

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and resistance to mundane arms that protected both demon and devil. Each time a cryptodaemon managed to find its way beneath Hedrenatherax's scythe arm or Gemnez's whirling chain, it would find that its blades were little better than knitting needles against the two mighty fiends.

The cacodaemons, although singed and disoriented by Gemnez's fiery attacks, were not mortally wounded. They recovered in time to see the two great fiends punching through the first line of cryptodaemons, and responded with bolts of electricity, globes of fire, and noxious clouds of acid. Their deep resonating voices rose over the battlefield in deep, arcane bellows, heralding the release of each powerful spell.

Hedrenatherax and Gemnez fought on through the rain of magical energy. Much of it simply failed to affect them, unable to pierce both mighty fiends' considerable resistance to magic. But enough of the cacodaemons' energy blasts found their mark that both devil and demon lord were scorched with electrical discharge and burned by acid.

The cryptodaemons, emboldened by the cacodaemons' magical assault, redoubled their efforts, and Hedrenatherax and Gemnez found their forward movement completely thwarted by a giant tangle of the smaller daemons. Both fell upon their foes tirelessly, and scores of slain daemons fell and were crushed beneath the tread of the two massive fiends. Despite their inability to actually wound the two attackers, the cryptodaemons and their swarming mass did manage to turn the battlefield into a quagmire of grasping limbs and mangled bodies.

"We cannot keep this up much longer!" Hedrenatherax howled, and cut two cryptodaemons in half with a single swipe of his scythe arm.

"Agreed!" Gemnez shouted back, snaking his spiked chain around the neck of a cryptodaemon and removing its head in a spray of ichor. "But we cannot retreat!"

The small group of azodaemons, idle until this point, now took to the wing. The large, bat-like fiends soared up into the gray sky and positioned themselves over the two battling archfiends below. Then, without hesitation, they began falling out of the sky.

Gemnez happened to glance up as the first of the plummeting azodaemons neared the ground. Its bulky body was aimed at Hedrenatherax, who, locked in mortal combat with innumerable foes, was oblivious to the danger above. With preternatural speed, Gemnez flicked his spiked chain forward, wrapped its length around Hedrenatherax's waist, and pulled

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with all his might. Gemnez's skill with his weapon was such that the spiny links of his chain did not bite into the demon lord's flesh as he yanked Hedrenatherax backward, away from the falling azodaemon.

Instead of striking its intended target, the azodaemon landed upon a tangle of cryptodaemons that had flowed into the space Hedrenatherax had recently occupied. The large, winged daemon crushed the smaller fiends directly beneath it, and scattered those on the peripheral of the impact. The azodaemon, uninjured from its fall, rose from the small crater it had created in the lifeless Hades soil to meet the massive downward stroke of Hedrenatherax's scythe arm. The bony blade cleaved its bat-like skull to the collarbone, and it collapsed dead onto the shattered pile of cryptodaemon bodies it had crushed upon its impact with the ground.

The falling azodaemon had inadvertently created a large gap in the cryptodaemon line, and Hedrenatherax and Gemnez seized upon their good fortune and charged through.

"The boundary is at the base of that hill," Gemnez called from behind Hedrenatherax as the two fiends raced forward. Ahead, the low hill that made up the opposite side of the valley loomed, and a faint line of shimmering energy hung suspended in the air at its base – the accord boundary was visible.

Behind the two archfiends the cryptodaemons had recovered and were surging ahead in pursuit of their fleeing quarry. The azodaemons continued their plummeting assault on Gemnez and Hedrenatherax, but not one of the falling demons managed to hit their target. Through some magic of their daemonic nature, the azodaemons were completely uninjured by their impact with the ground, and after each attempt, they simply got up, flapped aloft, and tried again.

Now, not more than a hundred feet separated the two fleeing archfiends from their destination, but one more obstacle remained. The six cacodaemons had maneuvered themselves directly in front of Gemnez and Hedrenatherax, and were preparing to make a last ditch effort to halt their advance. Both archfiends knew that if they were slowed, the cryptodaemons behind would catch up, and they would be pinned between the scrabbling mass of the lesser fiends and the deadly spells of the greater ones.

"Don't stop!" Gemnez howled.

Hedrenatherax nodded and lowered his head, preparing to bring the two horns jutting from his brow into play like a charging bull.

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The cacodaemons launched spell after spell at the charging archfiends, scorching them with magical energy, but doing little to halt their forward momentum. The crocodile-headed fiends, although fearsome in appearance, were not overly skilled at direct confrontation. But with little choice, they drew long iron scimitars from where they hung at their sides, and prepared to meet Gemnez and Hedrenatherax in close combat.

Gemnez, however, had no desire to engage the cacodaemons at all, and a rather reckless idea formed in his brain as he glanced up to see another azodaemon preparing for a freefall attack.

The azodaemon had reached the terminus of its climb and began its plummeting descent towards the two archfiends. It had timed its fall perfectly and would strike Hedrenatherax just before he reached the group of cacodaemons. Gemnez watched the daemon fall as he ran, and began to whirl his spiked chain in a tight loop. Hedrenatherax, again, was oblivious to the threat from above, his attention focused on the cacodaemons ahead.

The azodaemon sped earthward like a great winged comet, and when it was no more than a few feet above Hedrenatherax's head, Gemnez's chain shot forward like a great spiky lasso, and wrapped around the falling daemons body. With a great heave Gemnez pulled the azodaemon off target, and then spun his body around, whirling the azodaemon like a great, clumsy flail.

"Hedrenatherax!" Gemnez howled. "DUCK!"

The demon lord responded immediately to the rogue devil behind him by slamming himself flat to the ground. Gemnez completed his whirling circle and released the azodaemon from his spiked chain. The winged fiend was hurled like a massive, organic boulder over the head of Hedrenatherax and directly into the clumped group of cacodaemons. The crocodile-headed fiends went down like a set of ninepins, smashed flat by the massive bulk of the hurled azodaemon.

"GO! GO!" Gemnez shouted, sprinting forward.

Hedrenatherax climbed to his feet, grinning, and joined Gemnez in a headlong sprint towards the shimmering curtain of arcane energy at the base of the hill.

"Oh, toad," Hedrenatherax laughed as he ran. "That was maybe the most 'chaotic' thing I've ever seen a devil do."

Gemnez smiled wanly through his labored breathing, but did not reply.

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The two archfiends rushed over the group of fallen cacodaemons, smashing one of them flat beneath their heavy tread, and passed through the boundary of the accord's magic. Beyond the curtain of energy, they halted, lingered for half a heartbeat, and then disappeared with a hiss of magical energy.

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"How…how…is this possible?" Igyx stammered. The babau continued to back away from the hulking form of Hazergal, whom he had just seen make a demonic evolutionary leap that normally took hundreds of years and a dip in the scalding magic of a spawning pit to accomplish.

"Igyx, I won't harm you," Hazergal said and took a step toward the babau, all four limbs raised in a gesture of peace. The former archmage was momentarily struck with wonder that his demonic mind moved his limbs with no real effort. The mental agility it took to move six limbs at once should not be something a creature took to immediately, especially when he was used to moving just four. Hazergal wondered if his next transformation would be to marilith, and what it would be like to move six arms and a serpentine body.

Igyx lowered his sword and stood his ground as Hazergal advanced. "Igyx feels your mind," the babau said with a nod. "I know it is you, my lord."

Hazergal felt the momentary brush of the babau's consciousness against his own, as Igyx confirmed via telepathy that Hazergal was indeed the vrock mage he had met earlier in the day.

"Igyx, why did you call me that? *My lord?*"

The babau opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it with a snap. His eyes clouded and his fanged mouth turned down in a frown. "I…Igyx does not know. But it feels *right*."

"Igyx, do you know me?" Hazergal asked, he voice quiet. He was now standing in front of the babau, his nearly twenty-foot frame towering over the smaller demon.

"Yes…and no," Igyx replied. "When I felt your mind, there was…familiarity. Kinship. Yes, a kinship that I don't understand." The babau stared hard at Hazergal, and the archmage could feel the babau's mind working furiously, attempting to sort out the bizarre relationship between them.

Hazergal noticed that again that Igyx had dropped the third person reference to himself. He seemed to do that in these strange moments of

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clarity they shared. And then, something clicked in Hazergal's mind. Like tumblers aligning in a lock, an idea fell into place, something simultaneously wonderful and terrible. "Igyx, do you remember your life as a mortal?" he asked, fearing what the answer might be.

"I remember something…like a dream," the babau said. "A throne… and men with swords and armor. Pain, and then a sense of falling, endlessly falling." Igyx's swallowed hard and continued. "I remember a pit of fire that glowed green, and a great fat fiend with a painted face…and then more pain."

Gemnez, Hazergal realized. Horror, cold and liquid, settled into Hazergal belly, but he had to hear the rest. "Tell me, Igyx. Tell me all of it."

"After the pain, there was change, and this," Igyx slapped his black, skeletal chest with his sword hand. "This *body.* I served the fat fiend for a time, fishing others out of the slime pits as they *changed.* But then the great fiery demon came; the balor, and he killed many like me until the fat one stopped him. After that, in the confusion, I left, and I walked across the empty plains. I found my pets along the way, and they kept me company until I came here."

Hazergal drew in a deep breath; he felt the roughshod caress of fate pressing down on him, smothering his mind with the awful choice he knew he must make. "Igyx…" the newly-birthed glabrezu found that his mouth was as dry as an empty well. "Igyx, what was your name before you came to the Abyss, do you remember?"

The babau's frown deepened, and Hazergal could see the battle taking place in Igyx's eyes as he grasped at the elusive bit of memory. "It's there, I can feel it in the back of my mind," he said. "But I can't take hold of it."

There was nothing more for Hazergal to do; the choice would be made now or never. A rush of hatred and rage bubbled up from the darkest portions of Hazergal's human soul. It enveloped his mind, clouded his reason, and forced the massive pincers at the end of each of his two largest arms to clash together reflexively. The name that had long ago withered on his lips now rested on his tongue, and he silently cursed the fate that had led him to this awful moment. "Your name was Azadan," he finally said, fighting the urge to rip apart the babau whose body housed the soul of a traitor.

"*Azadan,*" Igyx whispered reverently, "Yes, that was my name. Azadan." Suddenly, the babau's eyes flashed, and Hazergal could see a torrential

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flood of memory smashing into Igyx/Azadan's brain. The former archmage knew that the tides of this memory wave would bring clarity, and as he had experienced himself, a bottomless pit of sorrow and dismay.

Hazergal looked down at Azadan as the memories filled the babau's mind. His betrayer still held a sword and shield, and Hazergal knew that the former commander of his armies was as skilled now with a blade as he had been as a mortal. A dozen spells flashed into his mind, powerful evocations that would burn, freeze, and rupture the body of the creature that had thrust this awful fate, this cosmic joke of an existence, upon him. Hazergal wanted to smite Azadan for his betrayal, rend his flesh, burn his soul, and let him experience the empty pit of emotional agony that had become Hazergal's own existence.

But he could not do it. He could not bring himself to unleash the power that ached within him and wipe Azadan from the face of the multiverse. As much as he was loath to admit it, there were other emotions behind his rage, and now, faced with the specter of his former friend and trusted confidant, Hazergal was forced to give voice to these conflicted feelings. "Why did you betray me, Azadan? I would have given you anything, granted any wish that you desired. All I asked was that you serve me."

Azadan's sword slid from nerveless fingers to clatter upon the ground. The babau then sunk to his knees, his horrid, demonic face a mask of grief and sorrow. "I don't know anymore," he whispered. "It all seems so foolish and desperate now. The petty quibbles of men seem so pointless compared to all of this." Azadan spread his arms wide. "If you slay me here, will it be over? Or will I simply return again and again in some new and horrible form to relive the failures of my life anew?"

Hazergal stared down at the grief-stricken demon before him, his mind howling with conflicting thoughts and emotions. Part of him ached for vengeance, yearned to reach down and tear Azadan to pieces and slake a thirst for retribution he had carried unfulfilled for what seemed like a thousand years. But the other part of him saw only his old friend, the one creature in the multiverse he had been able to rely on…up until the fateful day when he had been betrayed.

"Hazergal, your death brought me only suffering, and that suffering continues now." Azadan looked up into the face of the master he had served for so long. His eyes were pleading. "Either slay me or let me serve you again, I care not which, but do not leave me in limbo; I have no where

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to go. Even the ignorance that was Igyx has been taken from me now."

Azadan's pain and his anguished words were not lost on Hazergal, and the war that raged in his heart was finally decided by the babau's impassioned plea. No matter what had transpired between them when they were mortals, there was no denying that there was also friendship. And surrounded by demons, devils, and other alien beings, Hazergal could not help but long for the point of view—and loath to admit it as he was, the companionship—offered by another mind that remembered what it was to be human.

Hazergal stooped and plucked Azadan's sword from the ground with his smaller set of human-like arms. Thinking his old master meant to strike him down, Azadan bent his head and offered his neck for the killing blow. Instead Hazergal lifted the babau's head with the point of one pincered claw, and looked directly into Azadan's eyes. "Serve me, as you once did, and we shall take this plane by the throat and make it our own," he whispered fiercely.

Azadan's eyes grew wide and his mouth worked silently. He had been expecting death, not absolution.

Hazergal straightened and revered his grip on Azadan's sword, offering the weapon to the babau hilt first. "Serve me," he repeated.

Azadan rose slowly from the ground and reached out one spindly hand to touch the cool metal of the sword's hilt. He smiled, a fanged nightmare that was somehow beautiful to Hazergal. "With all that I am, I swear to you," Azadan said and accepted the blade.

Hazergal placed both of his human hands upon the babau's shoulders, a fatherly gesture that Azadan did not shrink from. "Do you remember when we smashed the Dukes of Othregard, and claimed our empire?" he asked.

"Oh yes, my lord," Azadan replied, smiling. "We were outnumbered two to one, and we still broke those arrogant bastards, looted their cities, ravaged their women, and then let them dance on the end of a hangman's rope for good measure."

"Hah!" Hazergal threw his head back and laughed. The rage and thirst for vengeance that had plagued him for so long had simply drained away. In its place was the simple joy of reminiscing with a trusted friend. "Ovedus wept like a girl when they strung him up, and Rizak soiled himself before the noose even settled around his neck."

"We were unstoppable, my lord," Azadan said. "With your magic and

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my steel, none could stand against us."

"And none shall," Hazergal said, drawing the babau closer. "There is much work to do here, and I will try to explain as much as possible, but now I must get to Hedrax and claim the sword *Fiendbleeder.* Do you still remember the way?"

Azadan smiled and pulled away from Hazergal. "Of course, my lord," he said, and moved to the vast dining table that had once served Kynkaros and his fat paramour. The babau knocked the mammoth table aside with a single savage kick, and then slammed his sword into a section of floor that had been beneath the table. Using the blade like a pry bar, Azadan levered a great, flat section of the floor aside, revealing a dark hole that led down into the hard packed earth of the abyssal plane.

It was plain to see that the tunnel was not part of the original construction of the citadel. For one, it was carved into what would have been the east wall of the room had the citadel been right side up rather than leaning on its side. Secondly, it was raw earth beneath, not the worked the stone of a true secret passage conceived by the citadel's original builders.

It was a large hole, and while it would admit the gangly form of Azadan, Hazergal's glabrezu body was simply too large. But the former archmage had been solving his problems with magic for most of his mortal life, and all of what had come after. A simple muttered spell shrunk his mammoth frame from nearly twenty feet in height to just under ten, with an appropriate decrease in mass and weight.

Hazergal walked to the lip of the tunnel that led to Hedrax and placed one massive claw upon Azadan's shoulder. "Come my friend, there is much to do." He then stepped over the lip of the hole and disappeared into the darkness below.

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The Archodaemon Ozynthraxus stared silently into the depths of a massive crystalline sphere. The daemon's eyes, two ovals of blazing scarlet, bore into the swirling murk of the scrying orb, attempting to pierce its veil and divine something of the uncertain future.

The Lord of All Daemons had been gazing unsuccessfully into the orb for nearly three days, and as of yet, the mists of prescience had not parted to reveal anything of import. As supreme ruler of the myriad races of daemon-kind, Ozynthraxus walked a fine and precarious line. His title and power had been gained by usurpation of the former Archodaemon's power, and although claiming his title had involved incalculable peril, keeping it was far more arduous..

The great daemon slumped into his high backed chair. That throne-like seat, the mammoth scrying orb, and the stand supporting it were the only furnishings in a huge, round room of sterile white marble. The scrying chamber was positioned at the very top of Ozynthraxus' tower, the iconic seat of power for daemon-kind, the Kin'Drok. Here he had held power for a thousand years, commanding the hearts and minds – at least in theory – of his lesser brethren.

The key to Ozynthraxus' power, like the many Archodaemons before him, was the eternal conflict between the Abyss and the Nine Hells. At his command, the powerful daemon-lords, unique creatures of lesser stature that the Archodaemon himself, marshaled their personal armies and sold their services to the various demon lords and archdevils. These fiendish mercenaries then fought for their employers, adding their strength to the armies of demons and devils that clashed perpetually upon the war-torn lower planes. Of course, these daemonic soldiers did little to turn the tide for either side, but Ozynthraxus worked hard to maintain the illusion for both sides that the war was winnable – if only they had a few more daemonic troops at their disposal.

Payment for daemonic mercenaries came in the form of mortal souls, usually as worm-like larvae. These larvae were then used to create more daemons, or often as not, were sold back to the demon lords and archdevils

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for use in their own spawning pits. It was a beautiful, profitable circle that had existed for millennia, and Ozynthraxus and his kind had grown powerful from it. But recent events had placed it all in jeopardy.

Ozynthraxus brought one six-fingered hand up to his face, and stroked his hairless brow with long, delicate fingers. The Archodaemon's face was an impassive oval of gray flesh; mouthless, earless, bereft of any defining feature save his great, blazing eyes. Despite his lack of demonstrative facial features, Ozynthraxus' body language betrayed an immense frustration and strain. The very air around him was thick with the powerful fiend's consternation, and for the first time in thousands of years, he had no idea what was going to happen next.

The source of Ozynthraxus' anxiety was a bit of recent news, carried to him along the chain of loose tongues that infested every layer of the lower planes. Gossip was a hot commodity in the Hells, the Abyss, and even here, in the smoking crags and peaks of burning Gehenna, and Ozynthraxus made certain that his ear was always open to a stray bit of rumor and hearsay.

However, this time the gossip was not simply idle chatter about the overthrow of this demon prince or that duke of hell. It was far more grave, and Ozynthraxus had spent nearly every second of the past months attempting to gather as much information as possible about a situation that threatened not only his power, but the fundamental makeup of the daemonic race.

Yaghur Hod had returned.

For eons untold, Yaghur Hod had been the icon of ultimate daemonic power…and ultimate daemonic failure. He was a primordial legend, a specter from a time predating the rise of mortals and the creation of the Prime Material Planes. Yaghur Hod's failed attempt to conquer Elysium stood as a grim reminder of a daemon's place in the multiverse. It was not to rule nor conquer, but to profit. The Archodaemon's role was one of the grand manipulator, playing the forces of chaos and law against one another for the profit of the daemonic race. In this way, the daemonic race survived, flourished, and grew stronger.

Yaghur Hod, on the other hand, stood for an archaic concept that was left behind long before Ozynthraxus crawled from the slime of the spawning pit. The concept of eternal night, the spread of darkness and despair throughout all corners of the multiverse, until all the existed was a tenebrous empire of lightless damnation. Ozynthraxus shuddered at the

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thought. Where was the profit in that? Who wanted to rule a stale empire where every creature bowed to the whim of a single ruler? It was anathema to all he had worked to create for his race.

But now Yaghur Hod had returned. Freed from his prison on Elysium, the first Archodaemon was a random factor in Ozynthraxus harmony of schemes, power plays, and manipulations. The legendary demon's power was impossible to determine, but it was certain that at some point he would seek to reclaim his title as absolute ruler of the daemonic race.

Ozynthraxus had set all of his considerable resources and magical skill to divining Yaghur Hod's plans, but to no avail. The great Archodaemon was like a ghost in a whirlwind, ethereal and impossible to follow. Not one of Ozynthraxus' army of spies and informants had been able to find out anything regarding Yaghur Hod's movements, and three days of scrying had left the current Archodaemon with little more than a throbbing ache in the back of his skull.

Even his best informant, a rogue devil named Gemnez, was useless in this matter. In fact, Ozynthraxus had been unable to contact the renegade horned devil for quite some time. The clandestine couriers he had dispatched to make his will known to Gemnez had not returned, and Ozynthraxus feared that his best informant had done the unthinkable – he had chosen one party to back rather than playing all parties against one another.

A simple philosophy was the foundation of Ozynthraxus' rule – know everything. And although it seemed an impossible task, the Archodaemon could amass information like no other creature in the multiverse. He knew about his opponent's movements and tactics long before they had even devised them, and he could counter threats placed against him long before they even materialized. It was a kind of precognition, although there was no magic involved. Ozynthraxus simply knew everything there was to know about his opponents, and with his near god-like intellect and intuition could predict their movements with an accuracy that far exceeded the most skilled diviner. Unfortunately, the current situation defied every means at his disposal, and for the first time Ozynthraxus was forced to wait and react to his opponent.

The only piece of information Ozynthraxus had been able to glean from his exhaustive search for Yaghur Hod was that the great Archodaemon had returned to Har'Drok, the former seat of daemonic power in Hades. The current Archodaemon had dispatched a small army of powerful servants

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to the ancient tower, only to find it deserted. Even more puzzling was the hundreds of daemonic corpses, mostly lesser daemons, found inside and around the tower. These daemons had obviously died in battle, although there was no sign of their slayer. Yaghur Hod had definitely been in residence at Har'Drok for a short time, but his reasons for leaving and his current whereabouts were still a mystery.

Ozynthraxus right hand stole down to the red gem that hung from a silver chain around his neck. The gem was known as the *Archonatrix,* and it was the symbol of the Archodaemon's power over his race. The gem gave its owner the power to influence the minds of lesser daemons, and although it did not allow for complete mental domination, the *Archonatrix* did subtly place an Archodaemon's wishes into the thoughts of daemon-kind. The gem was the key to success for any daemonic ruler, for without it, the various races of daemon-kind, selfish and fractious, could not be turned to any cohesive purpose.

As he held the *Archonatrix*, Ozynthraxus felt the subtle pressure of millions of daemon minds, each linked to the gem, and through it, to his own desires and goals. If a daemon of Yaghur Hod's stature were to gain control of the *Archonatrix*, then the gem's own powers would likely be enhanced, and subtle influence would become outright domination. With the entire race of daemons at his disposal, Yaghur Hod would be nearly unstoppable, and the multiverse would be cast into a darkness from which it would never return.

There was not an ounce of altruism in the twisted soul of Ozynthraxus, but he had every desire to go on living and to maintain his current power and rule. If Yaghur Hod were to gain control of the *Archonatrix*, then the cleverly balanced dance the Archodaemons had maintained for so long would be undone.

Ozynthraxus was so deep in thought that he did not hear the oiled whisper of the scrying room's only door swinging open. But he felt the massive presence that entered the room like slap across the face. The Archodaemon lurched to his feat, knocking his chair over with a clamor, and drew the long straight blade the hung from his waist beneath his voluminous black robes. Ozynthraxus whirled around to stare at a creature that could almost be his double, save for the ebony black skin, and the maimed right leg that ended at the knee.

Yaghur Hod glided toward Ozynthraxus, hovering a few inches from

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the marble floor of the scrying chamber. The elder daemon carried his scythe, *Blightrazor*, in one hand, and the severed, crocodile-like head of a cacodaemon in the other. "This attempted to bar my passage into your presence, *my lord*," Yaghur Hod said, his voice buzzing around the room, issuing from the empty air. He tossed the severed head of the cacodaemon at Ozynthraxus' feet, where it landed with a splat of green ichor.

The current Archodaemon's form blurred, and a tall, rakish human dressed in noble finery replaced the gaunt, faceless fiend. Ozynthraxus lowered his sword, and grounded its tip upon the marble floor. "Such impertinence is, of course, inexcusable," he said casually. "Corrective action was necessary on your part, no doubt."

Yaghur Hod followed suit with his younger peer, and his own form changed into the familiar shape of a wizened, human man. "Yes, well, good servants are exceedingly difficult to find. Something I have become all too familiar with of late."

"I had heard of your escape from Elysium, and rejoiced that such an esteemed member of our race could rejoin his people, and be of service to them," Ozynthraxus said. His voice was calm, but inside his guts roiled with terror. How had Yaghur Hod gained entrance unannounced into Kin'Drok?! No creature in the history of the tower had managed such a feat.

"Thank you, my lord," Yaghur Hod said with a bow. "I rushed here as soon as possible. There were a few loose ends that needed tidying up before I was able to place myself at your service. In fact, there are still a few nagging concerns that must be addressed, and if you would be so gracious as to assist me, these matters can be cleared away immediately."

The great Archodaemon's words carried an unmistakable threat, and Ozynthraxus frowned and lifted his sword from the ground. "Enough of this charade. We both know what you are here for," he said icily. "Will you take it from me and cast our people into darkness?"

"Darkness?" Yaghur Hod asked incredulously. "I mean to lead them to glory once more. It is you and your predecessors that have made whores and beggars of daemon-kind. I only wish to rescue them from such an ignoble existence."

"What was our race to do after your fool attempt at storming the heavens?" Ozynthraxus sneered. "We were left leaderless amid the burgeoning power of both devil and demon. The Archodaemons that followed you had no

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choice but to adapt to the rise of Chaos and Law. We survived, and our race has grown in both power and prosperity over the millennia."

"Only a fool would consider what has transpired since my imprisonment *prosperity*," Yaghur Hod spat. "Daemons are regarded as little more than mercenary scum across the multiverse. Fit only for cannon fodder in the pointless conflict between the Hells and the Abyss. And while our race spills its blood upon the fields of a senseless war, *you* grow fat and powerful here in Kin'Drok," Yaghur Hod leveled one bony finger at Ozynthraxus, "I ask you, what kind of legacy is this?"

Rage darkened Ozynthraxus' features, and he stepped toward Yaghur Hod. "How dare you storm in here after your own failure led to the circumstances you now condemn!" he shouted, the fear in his gut now replaced with burning ire. "The daemon race survives because of the war between devil and demon. If not for that we would be subjugated by the Hells or simply swallowed up by the Abyss. I, and those before me, ensured that our race continues, whatever the cost."

Yaghur Hod stepped back, his eyes flashing with vermilion fire. "*IMPERTINENT FOOL!*" he thundered, shaking the room with his rage. "You and your kind sit upon the dung heap you have made of our race and think yourselves benefactors of daemon-kind! You are as arrogant as any devil, recklessly ambitious as any demon lord, and a fool to think that *I* will allow it to continue!"

Ozynthraxus shrunk back from Yaghur Hod's outburst, raising his sword in a feeble gesture of warding. "Then what will you do, my lord? Strike me down and rip the *Archonatrix* from my corpse?"

The rage left Yaghur Hod's features, and his human face was suddenly creased by a deep and abiding sorrow that even Ozynthraxus felt. "I had hoped to avoid that. I have sacrificed enough already, and I would preserve one such as you, if given the choice. But make no mistake, I will cut you down and strip the power from your corpse if you leave me no other alternative."

"I will not hand over my power to you without a struggle," Ozynthraxus said. "I have suffered too much in its care and keeping to just lay it at your feet."

Yaghur Hod frowned; the disappointment in his eyes was profound. "So be it," he whispered, and his form changed again to the black, faceless horror that was his true form. Silently, he surged forward, both long-fingered hands locked around the haft of his massive scythe.

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Ozynthraxus muttered a quick incantation and raised his blade to ward off Yaghur Hod's scythe. The elder Archodaemon's weapon shattered Ozynthraxus' sword with a cacophonous roar, breaking the enchanted iron blade into a thousand pieces. *Blightrazor,* however, was not slowed by the destruction of its opposing weapon, and the wicked point of the scythe plowed a deep trench into Ozynthraxus' face and chest.

The current Archodaemon was thrown to the ground by the force of the strike, the massive, ragged wound across his face and upper chest leaking bright, crimson blood upon the stark white marble of the scrying room.

"How?" Ozynthraxus grunted from the ground. He had reverted to his true form, and the horrific wound inflicted by *Blightrazor* had blinded him in one eye. Still, he stared up at Yaghur Hod, one hand held up, a feeble ward against another blow.

"How have I defeated you so easily?" Yaghur Hod asked. "Did you really think your pathetic climb to the status of Archodaemon made you my equal? I was the first, and even in my weakest hour, I could still best one such as you. But I have reclaimed some of my former power, now I look down upon you as a mortal sees an insect, powerless and barely above notice."

"You…will destroy everything," Ozynthraxus managed to croak out. His body, normally proof against even enchanted weapons, was slowly succumbing to the dark power of *Blightrazor*, as the dread weapon infected his flesh with its unholy power.

"No, I will set things to right," Yaghur Hod said. He then bent over the mortally wounded Ozynthraxus and grasped the *Archonatrix* from where it hung around the stricken Archodaemon's neck. He snapped the chain with a single, savage yank and then stood with his prize. "I will restore our race to its proper place, and then we shall burn the heavens, and take our revenge upon the fields of Elysium."

"Others…will…rise…," Ozynthraxus whispered from the ground.

"To oppose me?" Yaghur Hod finished. "Of course they will. But I will strike them down, just as I have struck you down. Soon I will lead our people to the Abyss where the final key to my return rests, and then none will have the strength to oppose me."

Yaghur Hod stared down at the Ozynthraxus. The black power of *Blightrazor* had begun to consume the Archodaemon, and his body was

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withering away, like a swiftly, decomposing corpse. The defeated daemon still clung to life with fierce determination, but he had lost the ability to speak, and he was swiftly fading. Yaghur Hod was suddenly taken with great pity for his foe. "It didn't have to be this way, Ozynthraxus," he said quietly. "You could have served me. I would have welcomed you by my side."

Ozynthraxus, unable to speak, shook his head weakly, refusing even now to recognize Yaghur Hod's sovereignty.

"So be it," Yaghur Hod said. He raised *Blightrazor* and struck off Ozynthraxus' head with a single blow, sparing the Archodaemon from a slow, wasting death. He then walked over to the chair his opponent had recently vacated, set it upright, and sank into it slowly. Yaghur Hod set *Blightrazor* aside and held the *Archonatrix* before his face, dangling the bright red gem from its silver chain, and stared into its vermilion depths.

"Now it begins."

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Hedrenatherax's throne room was a silent tomb, empty save for a corpse. The desiccated body of the demon lord Pyrak hung on the wall above his usurper's throne. The dead vrock's vacant eyes stared out over the octagonal throne room, each glassy orb catching the light from low fires in braziers lining the walls, gleaming softly in the smoky gloom.

The deposed demon lord hung beside his most prized possession, the great black sword *Fiendbleeder*. Both sword and demon hung behind the throne, the better to remind all visitors of Hedrenatherax's victory over them.

Although Pyrak's body rotted away as a gruesome trophy of war, his mind and soul had never been extinguished. *Fiendbleeder* had captured both, and the sentient sword held the essence of its former master within the prison of its own inanimate mind.

Alive in some sense, and very much aware, Pyrak watched events transpire beyond the illusory walls of *Fiendbleeder's* mind. The sword had created a strange, semi-real dream-world where Pyrak spent the slow seconds of his existence. The sword had patterned its fabricated reality after a Prime Material world, one of the teeming thousands of such worlds that Pyrak, when alive, hadn't even been aware of. However, the small portion of this world *Fiendbleeder* had chosen as the shape of Pyrak's held a much greater significance.

The hexagonal chamber with its onyx floors and blood-red pillars had once been the seat of power for one Hazergal Redfist, a mortal wizard and tyrant. This wizard had died and his soul had been confined to the Abyss as a damned petitioner. This petitioner had been brought before Pyrak when he still lived and ruled. He had failed to recognize the unique abilities of Hazergal then, and the opportunity to harness a damned soul who still retained the power of a mortal archmage passed him by. Whether the recognition of Hazergal's true nature could have forestalled his own demise, Pyrak didn't know. But *Fiendbleeder's* interest in the petitioner led him to wonder.

Sitting on the floor of the facsimile of Hazergal's throne room, Pyrak

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pondered what might have been. Behind the demon lord rose a massive throne of black stone. It was empty now, but often times it held the grinning representation of *Fiendbleeder*'s consciousness. The sword chose to mold this form into that of a bearded human man – Hazergal as he had appeared at the height of his mortal power. The sword enjoyed gloating over Pyrak, reveling in its complete control over the mighty demon lord. But recently, Pyrak had found himself alone much of the time. It was impossible to measure the passing minutes, hours, and days in this fabricated reality, but Pyrak was able to glean a reckoning of time's passage by watching events beyond his mental prison.

Pyrak had found that with some mental effort he could look beyond the southern wall of the throne room. On these occasions the stone would become a misty looking glass through which he could watch events transpire in Hedrenatherax's throne room, where *Fiendbleeder's* physical form, and his own prison, now hung. Whether this ability was due to his own power or simply a pittance granted by *Fiendbleeder*, Pyrak didn't know, but it preserved what little sanity remained to him.

The dead demon lord had watched Hedrenatherax fumble through the rule of his former domain with a mixture of amusement and disgust. In a matter of months, the oafish usurper had managed to completely dismantle an Abyssal empire Pyrak had worked millennia to construct. Now the windswept plains of Vrack were home to little more than a motley horde of minor demons, Hedrenatherax's pathetic attempt at an Abyssal "army."

Pyrak had watched Hedrenatherax fume and rage as other, more powerful demon lords began to sense his weakness and move against him. Even the single alliance Hedrenatherax had made was a laughable affair, as he attempted to combine his own feeble resources with a demon lord even more pathetic than himself. Even more amusing to Pyrak was Gemnez, who had been promoted to be Hedrenatherax's major domo. The new demon lord had made a cardinal mistake there, one that most Abyssal rulers were very careful to avoid: your second in command should not be smarter and more capable than you are. It was quite obvious to Pyrak that an immense gulf separated Hedrenatherax and Gemnez, in both intellect and guile. The fat devil had manipulated Hedrenatherax with an ease that made Pyrak wonder if the rogue Infernal hadn't pulled a few tricks when serving *him* as well.

Fiendbleeder had also watched Hedrenatherax bumble through his day-to-day rule, but for a much different purpose. The sword hungered for any

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bit of news regarding Hazergal. Apparently, the strange petitioner could do quite a bit more than simply call on the power he had commanded while living. A dip in the spawning pits had turned him into a dretch, and oddly enough, the consumption of a few babau hearts had allowed him to become a babau himself. It was certainly possible that Hazergal had continued to climb the ranks of demonic forms since then, which of course both intrigued and infuriated *Fiendbleeder*.

The sword in which Pyrak found himself trapped was a powerful artifact, but it was powerless unless given access to a wielder's mind. It had made a grave mistake during the battle between Pyrak and Hedrenatherax, when it seemed certain that Pyrak would emerge the victor. Hedrenatherax, maimed and beaten, had attempted to wield the sword, but *Fiendbleeder* had rejected the balor, forcing him to take up another weapon, the terrible spear *Dreadskewer*. It had been *Dreadskewer,* hurled by a desperate Hedrenatherax, which had ended Pyrak's life, and so confined *Fiendbleeder* to its current ignoble position as a simple trophy.

Hedrenatherax had shown wisdom in one thing. He had not attempted to wield *Fiendbleeder,* thereby prohibiting the sword from gaining possession of his mind. *Fiendbleeder* had not counted on this, and had raged like a petulant child when it became obvious that Hedrenatherax had simply forgotten about it.

Despite *Fiendbleeder's* ire over Hedrenatherax's unwitting refusal to be dominated by the sword, the demon lord would only have been a stepping-stone towards a much larger goal. *Fiendbleeder* wished only to be wielded by the most powerful creature possible, thereby allowing it to enact its own goal. It wanted nothing less than the final destruction of every devil in existence. The sword saw Hazergal as the key to its ultimate conquest of the Nine Hells. The strange petitioner was a planar anomaly with unlimited potential, and *Fiendbleeder* desired more than anything to be the one to guide and ultimately exploit Hazergal's ascension.

Although *Fiendbleeder* had often gloated and raved about its plan to control Hazergal, it had never revealed why it had kept Pyrak's soul and essence in a conscious sentient form, rather than simply consuming it. Pyrak had a number of theories regarding the reasons for his continued existence. Paramount among these was the idea that *Fiendbleeder* needed him in order to overcome Hazergal. The slain demon lord possessed a fierce will of his own, and on the off chance that *Fiendbleeder* was not

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strong enough alone to dominate Hazergal, it likely would be with Pyrak's power added to its own. This scenario seemed to be the most plausible to Pyrak, and *Fiendbleeder* had already demonstrated that, in this miserable hallucinatory world, defying its wishes could be painful in the extreme.

But added to all this was the fact that as pathetic as his existence had become, Pyrak wished it to continue. This realization had surprised him, for in life he had been dominated by the sword's will, almost unable to act on his own whims and desires. The release of death had offered surcease from this servitude, but *Fiendbleeder* had thwarted him yet again, and entrapped his soul for its own devices. At first this seemed to be far worse than the slavery he had endured when alive, but something was different. Although Pyrak existed within the fabricated reality of *Fiendbleeder's* mind, the sword had no access to *his* mind. For the first time in millennia, Pyrak's thoughts were his own, his actions made of his own volition. It was a freedom sweeter than any he had experienced, and he could not help but revel it.

This mental freedom, however, did not prevent *Fiendbleeder* from coercing him in other ways. The sword could still force him to its will with the very effective application of pain. As unsubtle as it was, his soul-body could still be tormented with all manner of fiendish tortures. But, his mind was his own, and even while his body quaked with agony, he thoughts remained free and lucid, immune to all coercions.

But the freedom he experienced was not the primary reason he wished to go on living, even here in the shadowy confines of *Fiendbleeder's* soul. With his thoughts remaining hidden from his host, Pyrak plotted and schemed like the manipulative demon he was. His lucidity had awakened a thirst for revenge he had not felt since he had removed Pazuzu from his throne and usurped the ancient demon lord's power. Pyrak would have his revenge on *Fiendbleeder,* and the sword had unwittingly given him the power to claim it.

A pivotal moment was coming; Pyrak felt it in the air like the scent of a distant fire. He still had a role to play in the unfolding events in which Hazergal was the key and central figure. What ultimately became of the strange petitioner did not matter to him, but he would do all within his power to keep *Fiendbleeder* from using the former mortal for its own purposes. He still had no idea how he would accomplish this, but he felt that it would come to him in time. He felt the hand of fate resting upon

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his soul, and he would twist the inevitable outcome between Hazergal and *Fiendbleeder* to his own aims.

"It's been quiet out there for some time now," a monotone voice said from behind Pyrak.

The demon stood and turned around to behold *Fiendbleeder*, in the form of Hazergal, seated on the great black throne.

"The throne room has been empty since he and Gemnez left to treat with Yaghur Hod," Pyrak said. The mention of the legendary daemon lord put a crinkle in *Fiendbleeder's* brow, a rare sign of emotion for the usually stoic entity. This wasn't the first time the sword had reacted oddly to news of the powerful Archodaemon, and what Pyrak had initially thought was merely mild curiosity, now began to seem like something else entirely. It was beginning to look like worry, and maybe even fear.

Pyrak didn't know why the sword would fear Yaghur Hod, but anything that caused his captor anxiety was worth learning more about.

"Did that great oaf take the spear with him?" *Fiendbleeder* asked.

It was an odd question, and seemed to bear little relevance to the sword's recent goals. Pyrak sensed that this too held some significance, perhaps something related to Yaghur Hod. "Yes, he keeps *Dreadskewer* close at all times. I think he's grown a bit attached to it, seeing how it delivered him an empire." Pyrak touched his chest in the spot where the great spear had pierced it. Of course there was no wound in the semi-real body he now wore, but he still felt a subtle tingling over his heart when he thought about it.

Fiendbleeder frowned and the eyes in the human face it wore narrowed. It stared hard at Pyrak and the demon lord could feel the sword's alien will trying to press into him, to rifle through his consciousness as it had done when he was a living creature of flesh and blood. Pyrak resisted, and blocked the sword's entrance into his thoughts with minimal effort.

Fiendbleeder's frown deepened. "Why resist, demon?" it asked. "If I truly wanted to learn your thoughts I could pull them from you, one screaming breath at a time."

"What do you know of this Yaghur Hod," Pyrak asked, ignoring *Fiendbleeder's* unsubtle threat.

Again the flat black eyes of *Fiendbleeder's* human face narrowed, and its lips pulled away from the gums in an almost animalistic display of anger. But despite *Fiendbleeder's* building ire, it answered Pyrak in an even

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tone. "He is more legend than reality, an archaic relic from a time none remember. He is of no concern."

Pyrak smiled inwardly, knowing that *Fiendbleeder* was not truly lying, just obfuscating the significance of the ancient daemon lord. "He seems fairly real to me, and to Gemnez. I think that fat slug is leading Hedrenatherax to his doom."

Fiendbleeder waved a hand dismissively. "What does it matter? Hedrenatherax is a fool, and his death can only improve our lot."

"*Our* lot?" Pyrak asked incredulously.

Fiendbleeder sighed. "Yes demon, *our* lot. Your continued existence depends on you aiding me in the achievement of *my* goals. Otherwise, what use do I have of you?"

The threat was unmistakable, and Pyrak felt that he had probably pushed *Fiendbleeder* as far as was prudent at this point. Despite the sword's attempts at masking the truth, Pyrak felt that he had learned quite a bit. "Very well, *our* lot then," he conceded. "How do you suggest *we* bring Hazergal here?"

In reply *Fiendbleeder* simply pointed with one human finger over Pyrak's shoulder. "Look there, and you will see."

Pyrak turned around to stare through the misty window of the south wall and into the outside world, into Hedrenatherax's throne room. The chamber was no longer empty. The massive, multi-armed shape of a glabrezu and the smaller, furtive form of a babau stood in the dim gloom cast by the smoking braziers. There was something familiar about the glabrezu, something that made it stand apart from the rank and file of Abyssal creatures.

Hazergal! Pyrak suddenly realized. The strange petitioner had changed form again, and had now climbed into the upper echelon of demonic life. The demon lord watched as the former archmage's hulking form advanced across the throne room, his destination obvious.

"You see, demon. There was no need to lure him. He came of his volition," *Fiendbleeder* said, smiling.

Pyrak watched Hazergal reach out one massive, pincered claw. The appendage grew impossibly huge in the misty window from which he and *Fiendbleeder* viewed the outside world. *Too soon!* Pyrak screamed inside his own head. He had not expected the sword's plans to reach fruition so quickly. At this point he could not work against *Fiendbleeder,* and as soon

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as Hazergal's flesh came into contact with the sword's hilt, Pyrak would be forced to aid his captor in subduing Hazergal's mind.

"Prepare yourself, demon," *Fiendbleeder* whispered from the throne, its voice now filled with eagerness. "Destiny is upon us."

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Hazergal followed the shadowy form of Igyx—now Azadan—down the pitch-black length of a crudely dug tunnel. His demonic eyesight pieced the gloom readily enough out to a distance of about twenty paces, but beyond that there was nothing but smothering darkness.

Azadan moved like a great black spider, his long spindly legs and arms negotiating the cramped quarters with tenacious ease. Around the gaunt fiend a small horde of dretches cavorted and squirmed. Azadan had a bizarre connection to the tiny demons, one he had not lost upon his awakening and realization of his true self. While may of the mannerisms of his Igyx persona had been left behind, his strange, parental relationship with his "pets" had remained, much to Hazergal's consternation.

Hazergal's new, bulky glabrezu body was tightly compacted against the earthen walls of the tunnel. Even diminished with magic, his body was a massive, ponderous thing, and he found himself fighting claustrophobia each time he became snagged on a rough patch of wall, or tangled in the roots of some tenacious Abyssal plant.

"How much further, Azadan?" Hazergal called out. The tunnel had narrowed some, forcing him to crawl now on hands and knees.

"Not far, my lord." Azadan replied, craning his neck to peer back at Hazergal. "We should reach Hedrenatherax's throne room shortly."

Hazergal smiled in the darkness. Hearing Azadan call him "my lord" had been odd at first, but now the old familiarity had reasserted itself, and the two demons had fallen into old and comfortable habits. Their relationship on the Prima Material plane had ended with misery and death, but there had been a time when each had relied upon the other for advice, support, and—although an alien concept in the Abyss—friendship.

Hazergal found that just having Azadan near assuaged some of the doubt and horror that had plagued him since his arrival on the Abyssal planes, and once again, he felt that with his old friend by his side, nothing was beyond his grasp.

Azadan, too, seemed invigorated by their reunion. Besides his odd preoccupation with his motley horde of dretches, the former human

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seemed much his old self. The tireless strength and commanding presence had returned, and Azadan was again the formidable warrior and war leader Hazergal had built an empire with. Obviously, there would be some difficulty in explaining the strange babau's significance to his Abyssal allies, Gemnez and Pazuzu. But Hazergal felt that Gemnez would take it in all stride. The fat devil had an amazing capacity to accept and rationalize the strange events that surrounded Hazergal. In fact, the rogue Infernal seemed to thrive on it.

The future was an uncertain blur, and Hazergal could no more guess at the outcome of his bizarre situation that he could stem the radical changes that had taken over his body. His new multi-armed glabrezu body lacked the nimble adroitness of his vrock form, but what it lacked in agility it made up for in raw strength and magical power. Far more so than as a vrock, Hazergal felt the physical formidability he had never known in his mortal life.

The crushing strength in his two great pincers and wolf-like jaws was an intoxicating sensation. It took all of his self-control not to snatch up one of the irritating dretches that swarmed around himself and Azadan and crush the little beast to paste, just to feel it pulping beneath his demonic strength. In addition, the fertile groves of his mind, wherein lay the unawakened power of his near-limitless arcane might, had finally germinated and borne fruit. He could now sense the most potent spells and incantations he had called upon in life, there, ready to be unleashed for weal or woe. His power was growing, and it was a heady bloom.

But there was till a part of Hazergal that was human, and as much as the demonic portion of his soul ached to unleash his power, crush all the opposed him, and revel in his arcane superiority, his humanity held him in check. This reluctance to use the power growing inside him fully was not the result of any good will he felt for the inhabitants of the Abyss. Quite the opposite, in fact. He resisted the chaotic pull of his demon body simply because he refused to relinquish self-control. He would have power again, perhaps he would even rule in this blighted place. But it would be on his terms, and at a time of *his* choosing. Indulgence in any destructive whims or appetites would likely garner him nothing but more misery.

Hazergal crawled on, his mind whirling with power and the glimmering hope that he might be something more than a pawn for the likes of creatures such as Gemnez or Pazuzu.

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Azadan suddenly stopped ahead in the gloom. The babau sat on his haunches and was staring up at a massive square of stone resting in the rough dirt and debris of the unworked tunnel ceiling. His dretches had settled around him, and had instantly dozed off around their master like a pack of mangy dogs. Hazergal slapped two of the tiny demons aside as he neared Azadan.

"Have we reached the throne room?" he asked.

"Yes, I am listening. It would not be wise to surprise Hedrenatherax with an unannounced visit," Azadan replied.

Everything Hazergal had heard and seen of Hedrenatherax framed him as a bumbling oaf, an unimaginative simpleton. But he was still a demon lord, and despite his newfound strength, Hazergal had no desire to tangle with a creature of that magnitude just yet.

"Let me try something," Hazergal said, and nudged Azadan out of the way. He concentrated, focusing on a simple spell that would allow him to hear events beyond the stone walls of the tunnel. The magic flowed out of him like a deep breath released, and instantly he could hear fire crackling, gently, a controlled and contained blaze, not the rampaging inferno of fire magic. Beyond this there was only stillness. After a few heart beats Hazergal turned to Azadan. "It is empty above. We should make haste before Hedrenatherax returns."

Azadan nodded, but he was staring curiously at Hazergal, his thin lips set in a hard line.

"What is it, Azadan?" Hazergal asked.

Azadan shook his head. "My lord, I have seen you use magic hundreds of times when we ruled Othregard, and although I could never understand how you summoned such power, there was a definite pattern to your casting. There were strange words and complicated hand gestures each time the power was unleashed, but now…"

"Now it is like taking a breath," Hazergal said, nodding. "Since I first found myself in this blighted place, the magic has just been there, within easy reach. The more I grow within these bodies," Hazergal slapped his broad scaled chest, "the more I find I am less reliant on the arcane structures and confines I had accepted as immutable when I lived."

"I don't understand," Azadan said. "I had always understood that a wizard, even one of your stature, must commit his spells to memory by studying arcane texts."

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"You are correct, a mortal wizard must memorize his spells. However, demons and other planar creatures often cast spells simply by calling upon the innate magic within their souls, doing so without spellbooks or any of the limitations imposed upon mortal wizards. I seem to have gained this ability when I cam here, absorbing some kind of Abyssal power when I became a petitioner. I can now *see* all the spells and enchantments I utilized in life. They rest within my mind like ripened fruit on a bountiful tree, waiting to be plucked and savored, yet endless in supply. Also, as you have seen, I often need only concentrate to unleash a spell, although that seems to be the case only with lesser incantations. More powerful magics still force me to rely upon some of the old familiar patterns, the verbal and somatic components of magic."

"Then you are even mightier than you once were," Azadan said.

"Perhaps," Hazergal conceded. "But it is a thing beyond my comprehension, and this troubles me. Events have made it plain that my burgeoning power is somehow keyed to a larger destiny, an incomprehensible fate that you, my friend, are likely a part of." Hazergal sighed. "It is a thoroughly aggravating state of affairs, not understanding your own place in the scheme of things. And here in all of this chaos and misery, things are even harder to sort through."

Azadan placed one taloned hand upon Hazergal's immense shoulder. "But now we are together again, and as we once did, we will make the world conform to our wishes."

Hazergal smiled, his canine jaws splitting wide in a shark-toothed gape. "There was a time when all that kept me sane was the thought of your destruction. I thirsted for vengeance more than life or power, and I ached to repay your treachery."

Azadan removed his hand from Hazergal's shoulder and hung his head. "I failed you in Othregard, I know this. I was overcome by foolishness and greed. You gave me everything, but I still wanted for more, and when I thought I had achieved what it was I hungered for, the world crashed down around my ears. I do not wish to rule, I have tasted that fruit and found it bitter. If you will have me, I will serve you as I once did, and be content until the end of my days."

Hazergal felt Azadan's pain and it flowed into the void left by his own abandoned hatred for the creature that had once been his only friend. "Azadan, look at me," Hazergal commanded. The babau turned his face up

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to his former master; his eyes were windows looking out over an ocean of roiling torment and doubt. It was a sea that Hazergal had once found himself adrift upon in the not too distant past. "When first I realized whom you were, my desire for your destruction faded, and all I could see was my old friend, the one I had relied upon for so long. The events of our mortal lives are nothing but dreams in the ether now, forget them. Before us lies a great and untold destiny that I would not face alone."

"I swore to you I would serve you again, and I shall. I will follow you to the very gates of Hell if necessary, and beyond." Azadan's voice was rough with passion.

Hazergal chuckled. "I believe you, my friend. And your vow may not be an empty one, for we may well need to storm the infernal gates before this is over. Now help me move this seal."

Hazergal stood as far as he was able in the narrow confines of the tunnel and placed his two massive pincered arms on the stone plug that led to Hedrenatherax's throne room. Azadan joined him, and added his own considerable strength to the task. The two demons shoved once, and the stone seal moved up, allowing them to stand, holding the huge stone slab over their heads.

As Hazergal's head crested the rim of the stone plug he could see the grim, smoke-shrouded interior of Hedrenatherax's throne room. Gently, he and Azadan set aside the stone seal and climbed from the hole in the floor.

The throne room was a cavernous, octagonal chamber, with a high ceiling soaring sixty feet or more above their heads. At each corner of the room a squat, ugly brazier stood, burning with green flame and filling the room with foul-smelling smoke. Hazergal and Azadan had exited their tunnel near the southern end of the room. Behind them stood a squat iron door, which appeared to be the room's only ingress or egress. Ahead loomed Hedrenatherax's throne, as crude and unimaginative as its owner, a simple chair of rusted iron squatting like an ill-shaped gargoyle in the smoky gloom.

Outside of the oppressive confines of the dretch-dug tunnel, Hazergal dismissed the spell that had shrunk his giant form and allowed him to make the passage through the narrow passageway. His body swelled to its near twenty-foot height and again, he reveled in the physical majesty of his new form.

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"The sword is behind the throne," Azadan said, pointing to the far end of the mammoth room.

Hazergal could see indeterminate shapes behind the throne, obscured by the smoky haze that filled the room. He moved forward, and the shapes began to take on a familiar and horrific shape.

Fiendbleeder was where Azadan said it would be, suspended from mithral pegs on the wall behind the throne. It hung naked and unsheathed, its black blade cold and dull in the wan light of the throne room. The sword was certainly a great treasure and a trophy worthy of such a display, but it paled in comparison to the icon of wrath and triumph that hung beside it.

Pyrak's desiccated corpse hung next to the weapon that had made his legacy possible. The mummified flesh was nailed to the wall with a number of mithral spikes, displaying Pyrak in an ignoble spread-eagled sprawl for all time.

Something about Hedrenatherax's defilement of Pyrak's corpse filled Hazergal with anger. He had no reason to love Pyrak; the demon lord had shown him nothing more than cold indifference. But the demon lord's sovereign presence—his personal magnitude—was worthy of much more than being mounted like a skinned animal on a hunter's trophy wall.

Hazergal growled in disgust. "I have in my time made an example of my enemies, but to debase an equal, even a bitter rival in this manner, speaks more about the conqueror than the fallen. Hedrenatherax is truly an oafish lout if this is the extent of his conquest."

Azadan nodded silently, and reached down to stroke the head of one of his dretches affectionately. The little demons had followed their master into the throne room, and were now huddled around his feet, obviously terrified by the grim display on the wall.

Hazergal stepped close to Pyrak's dangling corpse. Even as a violated husk, the slain demon lord was an impressive sight. The luster had faded from his feathers, and his eyes were nothing but blank, empty sockets, but there remained a regal power in his great, demonic form. It was something that not even death could wrench free from Pyrak, and Hazergal could not help but feel some awe for a creature that had grabbed the world by the throat and shaken free his destiny.

It was this majesty, this presence that Pyrak commanded, even in death, which made the desecration of his remains all the more infuriating.

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Hazergal had himself been a sovereign, and although he had certainly not engendered the love of those he ruled, he hoped that he had at least earned enough respect to warrant something more than decaying trophy nailed to a wall.

"I had a grand pyre built for you my lord," Azadan said. He had plainly sensed Hazergal's discomfort of Pyrak's gaudily displayed corpse. "Thousands were in attendance, and as your body burned, they stood solemnly. There was no cheering. No exultations offered for the end of your reign. In fact, if there was any malice to be found in the hearts of your enemies, it was directed at me, for slaying you without honor. Many wanted you dead, but there was grudging respect for your accomplishments, and I believe they secretly hated me for cheating you of a worthy death."

"Yes. Fire. That was fitting, Azadan," Hazergal said, still staring at the silent corpse of Pyrak. "Do you think we will be remembered in Othregard?"

"You were all but a legend while you lived, and I have no doubt that the name of Hazergal Redfist will be whispered on the lips of every petty tyrant and aspiring warlord for a thousand years to come."

Hazergal smiled. "That is enough, then. I am well satisfied that our rule ended as it did. We shall begin again here." He continued to stare at Pyrak's body for a few more moments, reveling in the satisfaction that at least he had died with some honor. Azadan's voice snapped him from his reverie.

"My lord, we dare not tarry," Azadan said. "Hedrenatherax may return at any moment, and his guards, although lazy, might become alerted to our presence if we linger."

"Yes, I'm sorry, my friend. Let us claim what we came for and leave this place."

Hazergal moved to stand before *Fiendbleeder*, shuddering involuntarily as he came close enough to smell the coopery tang of the blood that had dried upon its heavy blade. It was the first time he had seen the sword up close, and he was struck with its ugliness. Its blade was a thick, cumbersome thing, and was mostly black with the glint of silver along its double edge. It looked oppressive and evil, and…*eager*. Hazergal could scarcely imagine the number of lives it had claimed in its long existence, and if the rumors of its sentience were true, what a dark and hateful thing it must be.

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The dretches at Azadan's feet suddenly mewled in terror, and Hazergal felt a thick, alien pressure on the back of his skull. A low whisper thrummed to life in the shadows of his mind, and an eerie monotonous voice began to mutter incomprehensively. There were no words in this quiet torrent of syllables, but Hazergal felt a strange longing in his soul, and the object of his desire lay within the inky blade of the demon-sword on the wall.

"My lord?" Hazergal heard Azadan ask from what seemed like miles away. "Are you alright? Hazergal?"

Hazergal ignored the babau by his side, and with the slow, languid movements of a dream, he reached out to claim his prize.

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Gemnez hated teleportation, and he avoided it whenever possible. Today, however, his and Hedrenatherax's flight from the tower of Har'Drok had left them with little choice, and teleportation had been the most expedient means of escape.

Teleportation is usually instantaneous, at least when both starting point and destination are on the same plane of existence. However, when traveling from one plane to another, such as the transition Gemnez and Hedrenatherax made from Gehenna to the Abyss, it took a bit longer. And there were other, more disconcerting side effects.

Gemnez and Hedrenatherax burst from the void outside the gates of Hedrax with a muffled popping noise and a flash of scarlet light. The journey had only taken a few seconds, but Gemnez felt like he had been spun inside a cyclone and then spit out at maximum velocity. The great fat devil clutched his ponderous abdomen, bent over, and voided a huge, steaming gout of bile and the half-digested dretch who had been his last meal.

"Heavens and Hells!" Gemnez swore, wiping the vomit from his garish red lips. "I hate long jaunts like that."

Hedrenatherax, who appeared none the worse for wear, chuckled at the pool of vomitus Gemnez had expelled. "I thought you had better culinary sense that to eat dretch-meat, toad."

"Uggh," Gemnez groaned, his flabby paws still holding his belly. "Please, do not speak of food." The great devil turned to look at the walls of Hedrax. There were a number of demonic faces peering over the battlements at the two great fiends, their faces a mix of amusement and fear.

"Open the gates!" Hedrenatherax bellowed, and rapped the massive iron aperture with the point of his scythe arm. His command was obeyed instantly, and the great portal swung open with a tortured shriek of metal on metal.

The gates opened on to a sparse courtyard ringed by the four great towers of the castle. Standing in the middle of the courtyard was a gargantuan, bison-headed demon. The massive beast was idly devouring

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the still wriggling corpse of a hezrou, stuffing the smaller demon into its mouth headfirst and grinding away with great, flat teeth. A mixture of greenish ichor and spittle ran down the massive demon's chin to spatter on the hard-packed earth of the courtyard. Other demons, babau mostly, stood well away, weapons clutched in shaking talons.

Gemnez strode up to the great bison-headed demon, nimbly avoiding the gory rain cast off by its unwilling meal. "Uzog, what have a told you about eating hezrou?" the fat devil asked, his tone scolding. "You know they give you gas."

Uzog stared down at Gemnez, its great dull eyes suddenly filled with disappointment. It pulled the remains of the hezrou from its mouth, now chewed down to a headless, armless torso dangling two frog-like legs, and dropped the messy carcass with a wet splat.

Hedrenatherax walked up behind Gemnez and peered at the ruined body of his servant. "That was the seneschal of Hedrax, toad," he remarked, his scaly brow furrowing in rage.

"Yes, well, Uzog here has a quite a taste for hezrou, and sometimes he forgets who his allies are. Don't you, you great oaf." Gemnez patted the one of the giant demon's elephantine legs affectionately. "But he serves his purpose."

Bereft of his prize, Uzog ambled back to the gate, shaking the ground with each mammoth footfall, and took up a great cold iron maul in his meaty fists. The huge demon rested the maul on one shoulder and resumed his role as gate guardian.

"Now, let us get inside and discuss current events, shall we?" Gemnez said to Hedrenatherax.

Still fuming over the loss of his seneschal, Hedrenatherax cast his eyes about for something to unleash his ire upon. Unfortunately, the rest of the demons under his command had quickly vacated the courtyard, perhaps sensing their explosive master would be none to pleased about losing yet another servant.

"I'm not exactly flush with capable minions, toad," Hedrenatherax spat, staring daggers at the oblivious form of Uzog. "I would appreciate it if you could keep that rock-headed mountain from eating any more of my servants."

"Oh, you've suddenly developed a soft spot for those forced to endure your leadership?" Gemnez said, feigning surprise. "How you've changed."

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Hedrenatherax stalked up to Gemnez, his clawed feet gouging furrows into the hard-packed earth with each heavy deliberate step. There was murder in his eyes and Gemnez could see the dull-witted rage of the balor Hedrenatherax had once been peaking through. "I should kill you, toad. For your betrayal at Har'Drok and for the centuries of hot air you've spewed from that painted hole in your face."

Gemnez sighed, and when he spoke, there was real disappointment in his voice. "I really thought you had learned something back in Gehenna. I thought perhaps you had shaken off the chains of blind, belligerent ambition, and recognized the weight of the situation at hand. You are an Abyssal ruler poised on the brink of ultimate destruction. Not only are you too weak to fend off the advances of other demon lords, but you have also incurred the ire of what is likely the most potent being the multiverse has seen in millennia. And still you are unable to control your rage and consider an alliance with the one creature that could actually help you save your miserable skin, and probably your sovereignty as well."

"Hah!" Hedrenatherax barked. "How could you possibly defend me from the forces of another demon lord, let alone something as powerful as Yaghur Hod?"

"Gods, you are dolt, Hedrenatherax," Gemnez said, shaking his great reptilian head. "Of course, I do not have the personal power to defend you, but I have made alliances with other powerful beings. Alliances that will soon become more important as Yaghur Hod gathers his forces."

"What alliances?" Hedrenatherax's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You mean, you've been planning my downfall for quite some time, haven't you?"

"Of course," Gemnez said nonchalantly. "But conditions have changed, and I would be much happier to call you my ally, than see you destroyed."

"Are you actually threatening me on my own plane, in my own keep?" Hedrenatherax said, his eyes had darkened to a deep shade of crimson; so fierce was the rage building inside him. He took another step toward Gemnez; his body trembling with barely contained violence.

Gemnez rolled his eyes, and clenched his fists in consternation. "Hedrenatherax," he whispered, his voice shaking with anger of his own. "If I wanted to see you dead, I would have let Dyzaja slay you in Har'Drok, and completed my alliance with Yaghur Hod. I have put myself in mortal jeopardy because there is something much larger at stake than any of our

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personal ambitions. Yaghur Hod has reclaimed a portion of his former power from *Dreadskewer,* and he has likely moved on Ozynthraxus already. The only thing that stands between him and the probable subjugation of the Abyss, the Nine Hells, and every other plane, lies in your throne room."

"Fiendbleeder." Hedrenatherax said slowly, remembering the conversation he and Gemnez had had in their flight from Har'Drok, and the implications of the powerful sword remaining in his possession.

"Yes, you remember now," Gemnez said, sarcastically. "Yaghur Hod will remove Ozynthraxus from power, and then storm the Abyss with a force of daemons larger than anything you can possibly imagine. That is why you, me, and any other allies we can draw to our side, must overcome any personal distaste we might have for one another, and unite. There is no other way to stop Yaghur Hod. And if he should reclaim *Fiendbleeder*, then the multiverse will be cast into a darkness that will make the conflict between the Abyss and the Nine Hells look tame by comparison."

"Then what can we do?" Hedrenatherax asked. The rage had left him, and in its place was the cold emptiness of fear, an emotion he had rarely felt, but was quickly becoming accustomed to.

"First, you need to put aside all of your personal ambition for the moment," Gemnez replied. "No easy task for a demon, or a devil for that matter. Then we must take stock of the resources available to us, which are not inconsiderable."

"Very well, toad," Hedrenatherax said. "It seems I have no choice but to trust you."

"Trust me?" Gemnez scoffed. "I'm not asking you to trust me. I'm asking you to ally yourself with me in order to preserve our very existence and the multiverse as we know it. I certainly don't trust *you*, but as much as I dislike it, even the paltry forces you command may prove pivotal in the conflict to come."

Hedrenatherax ignored Gemnez's insulting assessment of his rule with some difficulty, swallowing the tide of rage that threatened to burst free yet again. "You spoke of other resources and allies, who and what were you talking about?"

"Ah, now you're paying attention. Good," Gemnez said, smiling wide. "Before I explain anything else, I need to make sure that damn sword is where we left it."

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"Why? None of my minions would dare enter the throne room while I'm away. Besides, they're scared to death of *Fiendbleeder*."

"Ahem, yes, well, I actually sent someone to retrieve it while you and I were away in Har'Drok," Gemnez said, his face turning an ugly shade of pink.

"You did what!?" Hendrenatherax bellowed.

"Well, circumstances were different then, and the sword was integral to another alliance I have recently made with one of your rivals." Gemnez shuffled his feet in embarrassment.

Hedrenatherax stared hard at the great, fat devil, his fists clenching and unclenching, and then his fanged mouth suddenly split in a grin and he laughed out loud, great gusting bellows of laughter that peeled of the iron walls of the castle. "Oh, toad, nothing I could do to you is worse than you having to admit to *me* that you made an error. I mean, not only did you make an ill advised bargain with Yaghur Hod, which you then reneged on, you also slew his lover, and now you've sent someone to steal the only thing that stands between us and destruction from a place of safety." Hedrenatherax cackled again, bright red tears streaming down his face. "Oh gods, that's too good."

"Yes, well, it seems that you have divined the extent of my miscalculations very well," Gemnez said with a frown. "When you are through, I'd like to go inside and make sure the 'only thing that stands between us and destruction,' as you say, is still in our possession."

"Of course, toad" Hedrenatherax said, wiping the tears from his eyes. "My home is your home."

Gemnez rolled his eyes again, and started walking toward the castle's inner gates. This large aperture was a simple iron portcullis that led into another, smaller courtyard, beyond which was the entrance into the castle proper. The inner gate was guarded by two babau clutching long, jagged spears. The two minor demons attempted to make themselves as unobtrusive as possible as Gemnez waddled toward them. Gemnez passed through the inner gates followed by Hedrenatherax, who was still chuckling to himself.

The inner courtyard of Hedrax was well protected by the castle's soaring battlements, and was empty save for a statue of Hedrenatherax himself. The statue was life-size, although it was crudely made and rather ridiculous, as it depicted the demon lord decked out in regal finery, including a cape

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and a crown. Gemnez had seen the statue before, and he chuckled under his breath at the naïve audacity of it.

Across the inner courtyard another iron door waited, although this one was far less grandiose than the two that had preceded it. The door led to the central tower of Hedrax, which thrust up rather unimpressively into the Abyssal sky. Unlike Pyrak, Hedrenatherax did not rule from "on high", and his throne room was not at the top of the central tower, but rather below it, dug into the earth and darkness of the Abyssal plain.

The throne room was accessible through the bottom floor of the central tower, via a series of stone steps spiraling down into darkness. Gemnez and Hedrenatherax made their way down these steps in silence, each preoccupied with his own thoughts. The levity in the courtyard had been replaced by a grim stoicism, as the impending doom represented by Yaghur Hod became more apparent.

The two fiends reached the bottom of the great, stone stairs and were confronted with another ugly iron door, although this one bore Hedrenatherax's sigil, a characteristically unimaginative depiction of the demon lord's scythe-arm dripping blood. There was another pair of babau guards here, which Hedrenatherax dismissed with a wave of his hand. The two minor demons retreated back up the stone stairs, their bestial faces filled with relief.

Hedrenatherax pushed open the door to his inner sanctuary, and strode inside. Gemnez followed close behind. The huge octagonal room was filled with a smoky haze from a number of iron braziers burning with lurid green flame. The throne stood opposite the doorway trough which the two fiends had just entered, and behind the throne hung the corpse of Pyrak and the great sword *Fiendbleeder.*

Gemnez's initial relief at seeing the sword still in its place was almost instantly replaced by panic, as he saw two looming, demonic shapes standing near behind the throne. The larger of the two was reaching for *Fiendbleeder* with one massive pincered claw.

Hedrenatherax spied the two intruders at the same time as Gemnez, and he bellowed, "Stop! Thief!"

The two fiends at the opposite end of the throne room whirled around and Gemnez could see their shapes clearly now. The smaller of the two was a babau, larger than most. The spindly black-skinned demon held a long, double-bladed sword in his right hand and a clutched a simple round

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shield in the other. The second demon was a glabrezu, a hulking fiend with a canine head and two set of arms, one small and agile, the other massive and tipped with brutal pincers.

The glabrezu seemed surprised, and opened his mouth to speak, but Hedrenatherax did not give him a chance to do any talking. The demon lord broke into a dead charge, barreling down the length of the throne room like a living battering ram. He reached the end of the room in matter of seconds, expecting the glabrezu to meet his charge, but it was the sword-wielding babau that stepped into the huge fiend's path.

Hedrenatherax brought his scythe-arm whistling down at the babau, a blow that should have split the smaller demon in two. Instead, the spindly, agile demon deflected the majority of Hedrenatherax's blow with his shield, sidestepping at the same time to negate the rest of the strike's awesome power.

Flashes of his battle with Dyzaja leapt into Hedrenatherax's mind as his initial blow, which was completely ineffective, carried him forward and off balance, giving the sword-wielding babau a perfect opportunity to strike him from behind. Pain flared up Hedrenatherax's leg as the babau's blade bit into his flesh behind his knee. The smaller demon was hideously strong, and he wrenched his sword through the joint, sending his larger foe crashing to the ground in a crippled heap.

Gemnez watched the battle between Hedrenatherax and the babau unfold, moving slowly forward and unwinding the spiked chain from around his waist. He sensed that something wasn't right, and the massive devil did not intend to enter combat until he had taken the measure of his foes.

Hedrenatherax climbed to his knees in time to see that the babau had retreated and the glabrezu had moved to stand in front him, smaller arms waving in the unmistakable gestures of a spell.

Recognition flashed through Gemnez's mind at the sight of the spellcasting glabrezu, and he thundered forward, his chain flashing out in blurred steel arc. The barbed tip of the chain wrapped around the demon's right arm as it writhed and danced in arcane gesticulations. Gemnez yanked hard on the chain and the glabrezu stumbled forward with a howl, the spell dying on its lips with the break in concentration.

"Hazergal! Wait!" Gemnez called out, relaxing his grip upon the spiked chain and releasing the glabrezu. "Don't kill him."

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Hedrenatherax's eyes widened in disbelief. Hazergal had been the name of the damned petitioner he had plucked from Abrigor and brought before Pyrak. The damned petitioned that had become a dretch and then a babau, and now, obviously, a glabrezu. The damned petitioner that had dealt him a humiliating defeat at the spawning pits. And the damned petitioner that Gemnez had assured him was dead. The demon lord craned his neck to stare back at Gemnez, who waddled up smiling shamelessly.

"Why not kill him?" Hazergal asked, but stepped away from Hedrenatherax's kneeling form. "He certainly would have killed me."

"Yes, well, things have changed," Gemnez replied and moved up behind Hedrenatherax, bent over and grasped the demon lord underneath his arms and lifted the massive fiend to his feet. The wound in Hedrenatherax's knee was already healing.

"I can only begin to imagine the amount of lies you've told me, toad," Hedrenatherax whispered. "Why did you let this *thing* live?"

"I'm a devil, fool," Gemnez shot back with a wry smile. "What did you expect? Hazergal here is integral to the events that must now transpire. He is our greatest asset."

"This *abomination*?" Hedrenatherax said, pointing his scythe arm at Hazergal. "What can this freak do that is any use to us?"

"Oh come now," Hazergal said lightly. "You certainly remember our run in at the spawning pit. Well, I'm not impeded by a dretch body any longer, so if you would like try your hand against me once more, be my guest."

The Lord of Vrack growled and took one angry step forward, but again his path was impeded by the sword-wielding babau. "Back, you great stinking oaf," it said and slipped into what the demon lord could see was a very efficient and deadly fighting stance. Hedrenatherax halted, not wishing to feel the sting of the smaller demon's weapon again.

"Azadan," Hazergal said. "Leave him be…for now."

"*Azadan?*" Gemnez breathed. "Oh, Hazergal, we most definitely have some catching up to do."

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Book 3: Ascension

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A lone figure moved slowly over a barren, expanse of gray earth and stone. The sky overhead was mournful and blank, clothed in the same gray bleakness as the ground. The figure felt no wind, but heard a faint howling — a tired, aching whine that resonated across the lifeless landscape, as if the air itself was weeping at the desolation.

This was Hades, dreary plane of loss and regret, where the souls of selfish and wicked mortal beings were interred upon their deaths. These souls would be harvested by the hideous natives of the plane, the night hags, and have their very essence molded and shaped into the forms of foul, worm-like creatures called larvae. Like the insect larvae of the mortal worlds, which transformed into more complex creatures over the course of their short lives, larvae could evolve over time into more powerful fiends. This made these damned souls into the basic currency of the lower planes.

In ages past, Hades had been the seat of power of the daemons, the eldritch race of fiends that throve and multiplied in the early dawn of history. They grew mighty, conquered and enslaved the burgeoning races of lesser fiends, and strove to pull even the heavens down into the festering pit of darkness and evil.

In that long ago time, Hades had boiled and writhed with countless types of daemons and their vassals. Now the gray plane was nearly empty. It was controlled by the hideous night hags rather than its onetime masters. The daemons had degenerated into a petty, fractured society of mercenaries, commanded from the burning peaks of Gehenna by the whim of the Archodaemon. The glory of daemonic might had been stripped from the race, and they now languished as cannon fodder in the pointless and ceaseless war between two younger races of fiends: the demons and devils.

To the lone figure picking his way through the bleak landscape of Hades, this faded glory was acutely painful. Once he had led the daemons into the vaunted splendors of Elysium. His ambition had nearly cast down the rulers of that heavenly plane, and he had all but claimed it for his own. He was Yaghur Hod, the first Archodaemon; he was the greatest of his race.

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He had spent the countless ages since his invasion of the celestial paradise as Elysium's prisoner. Now the highest of the daemons was free, and he meant to reinstate himself and his daemonic kin as the masters of the lower planes. Toward that purpose, he moved across the gloom-choked plane that had once been his home. His destination lay upon the hazy horizon: a mountain of razor-sharp volcanic glass called the Gloomspire.

Yaghur Hod was a master of many shapes, but he wore his own this day. It seemed fitting that he should make the trek across the primal lands of his genesis in his true form. He was a tall, gaunt creature, robed in a gray shroud as bleak and haunted as the land of his birth. His head, visible above the shapelessness of his attire, was a giant oval of ebony-black skin, featureless save for a pair of great, glowing eyes. They protruded from the Archodaemon's head like two luminous eggs, shedding a wan green light that cast queer shadows on the gray stones of the surrounding landscape.

The greatest of daemons moved with a bizarre fluidity, his robed body passing over the ground despite the jumbled detritus of stones that choked his path. In truth, one who looked closely would have seen that Yaghur Hod's limbs were still even as his body traveled. No earthly locomotion carried him. He floated over the grayness like a wisp of fog. A single foot trailed beneath the Archodaemon's robes. Where the other should have been there hung a sharp, silvery peg: the legacy of a battle fought long ago, and a constant reminder of the price of failure.

Yaghur Hod carried no weapon but his fearsome scythe, *Blightrazor,* balanced over one shoulder. The midnight black of the weapon's blade flickered with a nimbus of crackling energy, its light holding at bay even the eternal gloom of Hades. The Archodaemon wore no adornment save for a great, red gem the size of a child's fist which hung from his neck on a silver chain. It flickered with a subtle radiance. Inside its murky depths swirled a scarlet mist. Occasionally, as Yaghur Hod moved toward his goal, his fingers touched the necklace absently; it was a vital piece of his plan to reclaim the power and influence that had been stripped from him so long ago. The great gem was known as the *Archonatrix*, and it had become a symbol of an Archodaemon's power from the time he himself had first donned it so many thousands of years ago.

Yaghur Hod had recently reclaimed the symbol of daemonic power from a rival's corpse. Ozynthraxus, the last in a line of pretenders that had taken up the mantle of Archodaemon after his imprisonment in Elysium,

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had borne the gem until his demise. The *Archonatrix* granted its master the ability to tap into the collective consciousness of daemon-kind and influence the actions and temperament of the entire race. It did not allow for something so crass and intrusive as direct control over a daemon's mind, but it did help to unite an entire race of fiends in a common purpose, swaying their selfish hearts towards the aim of their master.

Yaghur Hod could feel the minds of thousands upon thousands of daemons pressing against his own consciousness. It was not unpleasant, though only a mind such as his could separate the tumult of so many alien thoughts from his own. He whispered into the minds of every daemon in the multiverse: *return to Hades and wait.* This simple suggestion moved slowly through the multitude of demon-kind, but its effect was undeniable. Droves of daemons were abandoning their posts in both Infernal and Abyssal armies and seeking the plane of their birth, returning for a purpose they did not yet understand.

A grand daemonic army was massing near the tower of Har'Drok, Yaghur Hod's seat of power, and soon he would command a force of fiends that the multiverse had not seen in a thousand centuries. But he still needed one more thing to make his army of daemons complete, and it lay beneath the looming mountain ahead, in the blighted catacombs of the Gloomspire.

Hades was an old plane, rumored to be one of the first places of order and substance to emerge from the grand emptiness of an infant multiverse. Its opposite, the celestial realm of Elysium, appeared at the same time, a mirror of bright hope to Hades' tenebrous evil. Hades had existed long before even the daemons had crawled from the primordial mists and claimed dominion over the plane. But before the daemons, Hades had not been empty. Beings of terrible, alien power had once prowled the gloomy wastes, striving towards inscrutable purposes that even an ancient creature such as Yaghur Hod could not comprehend. Most of these unknowable abominations had passed into another plane of existence long before the rise of daemon-kind, exiled, perhaps willingly, into a realm of true chaos and madness that made the even the pandemonium of the Abyss look like a well-ordered machine. But some of these horrors remained, sleeping away the eons in lonely, forbidding places, dreaming of a time when their kind held sway — or of that unknown epoch when they might hold sway again.

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Yaghur Hod knew of one of these resting places, and he had once awakened the thing of nightmares that lay within. It was not the strongest of the ancient abominations, but still, it commanded a might that few could stand against, and Yaghur Hod meant to harness the creature to his will and unleash it upon his enemies.

As it slumbered, the monstrosity's dreams traveled upon the ether into the realms of mortal and immortal alike. These dreams manifested in the minds of certain luckless souls who were somehow receptive to such a violation. These chosen few were granted visions of unmitigated terror, and most simply died screaming and incoherent, their consciousness broken by the awesome power of the slumbering abomination. Some, however — strong enough to survive the unsubtle caress of the horror's thoughts — sought to worship the alien presence, and so gave name to the eldritch monster. The mortal men of a certain Prime Material world, who worshipped this being with rites so savage and brutal that they had been hunted down and exterminated for their blasphemy, once called it Abu-Hol. A sect of demons dwelling on a small Abyssal plane called it simply "The God-Eater," for the onetime ruler of this tiny Abyssal realm, a minor demigod, had once managed to awaken the thing, and had been devoured for his trouble.

Yaghur Hod simply called it "the Beast." He knew it for what it was, a primordial expression of rage, power, and savagery, unequaled by devil, demon, or daemon. The Archodaemon had awakened the Beast long ago, and had yoked it to his will, sating its endless appetite on the soldiers of Elysium's army. That was the only way it could be mastered: the promise of a near limitless feast of flesh, minds, and souls. If such a promise was made, the Beast could be commanded, honoring the pact for one year and one day. However, the Beast's appetites were unquenchable, and if a steady stream of victims were not delivered on a regular basis, it would devour the one who had awakened it and return to its near-eternal slumber beneath the Gloomspire.

Yaghur Hod had no fear that he would lack fresh souls to feed to the Beast. He intended to unleash the abomination upon all that opposed him, starting with any that stood between him and the next of his goals, claiming the sword *Fiendbleeder* from an oafish demon lord known as Hedrenatherax. The Archodaemon would march his daemonic army into the Abyss, unleashing the power of thousands of daemons, aided by the eldritch Beast he would shortly awaken, and smash all that opposed him.

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The Gloomspire was drawing near, and Yaghur Hod craned his neck to stare up at the towering expanse of rock and shadow. The mountain's summit was not visible from the ground. It thrust up into the gloomy sky of Hades, obscured by the thick banks of gray clouds and the darkness of the void beyond them. But what he sought lay beneath the mountain, at the end of an endless series of twisting tunnels and catacombs, choked with the remains of other ancient things. The Beast slumbered in a massive cavern at the heart of this labyrinth. It reclined upon a mountain of bones, the remains of countless victims collected over a million lifetimes.

The entrance into the catacombs beneath the mountain was accessible only by one who knew the proper words and intonations required to shift the massive stone slab that barred the way. These obscure phrases were in a language that had died long before the rise of law and chaos in the multiverse, a blasphemous tongue whose complex rhythm of cruel sounds and alien utterances smote the mind of any listener with incomparable madness and horror. Even one such as Yaghur Hod did not use the "black speech" lightly, and the great Archodaemon, who had witnessed horrors beyond the apprehension of mortal and immortal alike, shuddered involuntarily as he pulled the needed words from the dark corners of his mind.

Another few minutes of travel and the mountain loomed overhead, blotting out the sky with its enormity. Yaghur Hod had made the arduous journey from Har'Drok without the aid of magic, and it had taken him nearly three days to reach the Gloomspire. He viewed the trek with an ascetic's eye, reveling in the long days of solitude even as he prepared himself for the dangerous and vital task of awakening the Beast.

The base of the mountain was cluttered with the enormous skeletons of fantastic creatures, things that had once inhabited Hades and fed the appetites of the elder fiends. The skeletons were too bizarre to conform to any physiology that Yaghur Hod had ever seen in man, fiend, or beast. They were haunting relics of a vanished era, eerie and strangely threatening, their calcified remains piercing the ground like the teeth of some colossal monster.

Yaghur Hod made his way through the ancient ossuary, and finally arrived at his destination; a rectangular stone slab, slightly out of flush with the rock around it. It was truly epic in proportion, stretching up against the side of the mountain for many hundreds of feet. The massive door was unadorned save for a single weathered symbol carved into its surface: a

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great lidless eye set into a five-pointed star.

The symbol was simple in design, but it filled Yaghur Hod with a cold dread. He was an ancient creature, but even his beginnings were encapsulated in the rational ebb and flow of a history. Though few beings were old enough to remember that history, the events that constituted it could be known by a living mind. The symbol that had been carved into the Gloomspire's dark gate was from a time that none remembered, a time spoken of only in hushed whispers, even by the horrible entities that ruled the Nine Hells and the Abyss. It represented something alien and extreme, a not-so-subtle reminder that what ruled before could certainly do so again.

Idly fingering the *Archonatrix* where it hung from his neck, Yaghur Hod strode up to the great door. The thousand-fold whispers of his race quieted the uncertainly and dread he felt at approaching this ominous place. What he did now would lead him and his daemons back to their rightful station atop the multiverse. What he did here would set in motion a chain of events that would avenge the wrongs done to him and restore the proper order of the multiverse as he saw it. He would rule again, and not just the shrouded realm of Hades, but all of the lower planes. And when he had mastered the Hells and the Abyss, he would turn his eyes towards the heavens, where his ancient enemies would taste the bitter fruits of his retribution. And then, finally, the souls of mortals would be his to command, to shape into the forms that pleased *him,* to fill the planes with creatures made worthy of their existence by his hand.

These visions, these grand designs, filled the mind of the great daemon as he placed one hand against the cool stone of the gate. His form shimmered; the outline of the tall, gaunt fiend wavered, blurred, and shrank, leaving the body of a wizened old human man in its place. This was one of his favorite guises. Even though humans were a newer race in the multiverse, he found them intriguing, and emulating their soft, fleshy bodies often allowed him to feign weakness and keep his opponents guessing.

Yaghur Hod's mouth, now human, began to intone the dire words of black speech that would open the massive portal before him. The air wrinkled and shook, like the heat shimmering from a forge, as the greatest of the daemons uttered the foul syllables of that eldritch tongue. It was wild ululation of varied sounds, a vile utterance that could not, and should not, be taken as proper speech by the sane multiverse that existed beyond the reign of those terrible, elder entities. The lined human face Yaghur

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Hod now wore crinkled with the strain of speaking, and finally, when the last syllable twisted past his lips, he breathed a thick sigh of relief. A scant few seconds later, a heavy rumbling emanated from the great door, and with a cacophonous grating of stone on stone, it slid aside, revealing a cavernous darkness beyond.

Unhindered by darkness, Yaghur Hod's vision pierced the gloom to a distance of thirty yards or so. What was revealed to him was a gargantuan hall of worked stone, stretching back through the mountainside into a gulf of indelible night that not even his daemonic eyesight could penetrate. What he could see of the vast hall was as he remembered it from his previous visit so many thousands of years ago. The walls were filled with carved reliefs and friezes of cavorting shapes that fit no description of any living creature. These terrible, almost formless things writhed and danced down the length of the walls, filling every inch of space with alien visions that seemed to change — however minutely, as if moving of their own accord — every time Yaghur Hod looked away.

Yaghur Hod breathed deeply — he always enjoyed the little biological necessities required by his human form — and steeled himself for what lay ahead, letting the stale scents of untold eons fill his lungs. He took up his scythe in both hands and barked a single word, an arcane trigger that suddenly brightened the nimbus of pale green light surrounding the blade. The radiance penetrated the darkness inside the sepulcher-like vault ahead, casting weird, twisting shadows onto the millennia of dust that caked the stone floor.

The Archodaemon moved over the threshold of the great gate, taking the first step into a world where even his power was nothing beneath the crushing weight of untold eons.

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The great demon lord Orcus, Prince of the Undead, was experiencing the quaint, mortal notion of fear for the first time in his millennia-long existence. He was finding it an altogether unfamiliar and unpleasant experience. Not to say that the massive, goat-headed fiend was unacquainted with the *concept* of fear. He had spent thousands of years sowing horror among mortals. However, he was utterly unprepared to experience the emotion firsthand.

It is no simple matter to inflict such a humiliating state upon one of the awesomely powerful rulers of the Abyss. In his long rule, Orcus had withstood adversity and pain that would make a lesser creature shudder at the mere thought; there was very little in all the multiverse that could truly frighten a being of his power and status. Even death held no mystery for the self-titled Prince of the Undead. His mastery over those creatures that lived beyond the pale left him with no doubt that existence could certainly continue, virtually unchanged, long after the flesh had expired.

Despite his growing terror, however, outwardly Orcus displayed nothing except a lofty disdain and contempt for the events transpiring around him, even though those events included the utter destruction of his domain and rule. Currently, he lounged upon a massive slab of onyx supported by a small army of zombie servitors. They moved the demon lord, via telepathic command, anywhere he wished to go, trundling along like some horrid, necrotic centipede.

From his perch, Orcus stared out over the vast gray expanse of his domain, a craggy, desolate landscape of jutting volcanic rock and small pools of stagnant, alkali water. The sky overhead was a grim canvas of black clouds, roiling with crimson bursts of lightning and bloated with stinking, caustic rain. If a land could be called "dead," then Orcus's domain of Thenebrenar had certainly given up the ghost long ago.

This theme of death and decay was further extended by the roving legions of undead that inhabited the plane. Shambling hordes of zombies flowed over the barren landscape, overwhelming and devouring anything in their path, while packs of hungry ghouls and wights hunted minor demons

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in shadowy gulches and valleys. Orcus's status as Prince of Undeath allowed him to control these multitudes of walking dead, and his Abyssal horde contained far fewer demons that most demon lords of his rank. He did, however, boast a few demonic types unique to his domain. These horrors were ghastly combinations of undead and fiend, and were rightly feared for their toughness and resistance to magic.

It was widely believed that Orcus commanded the single largest horde in the Abyss, as he was quite fond of reanimating the corpses of his vanquished foes, adding their strength in death to his own. Legions of zombies, ghouls, wights, and other horrors marched along side demons and other fiendish creatures, constantly expanding the borders of Orcus's kingdom. The Prince of the Undead had conquered and absorbed the realms of countless lesser demon lords, and Thenebrenar was one of the largest Abyssal domains, rivaled only by the watery depths of Dagon's oceanic layer and the endless, plane-sprawling city of Abraxus.

Now, those days of expansion were at an end. Orcus looked out over the carnage of an Abyssal battlefield, where tens of thousands of his finest undead and demonic troops lay crushed, hacked, and sundered, their bodies carpeting the wasted landscape for miles. The architect of this destruction lay just beyond the carrion fields, an army of daemons so gargantuan it seemed to be a writhing, fiendish sea, and his own pitiful domain was simply a tiny barge at the mercy of its awful currents.

The daemonic army had appeared from nowhere, storming the borders of his realm in a vast wave of magic and steel. At first, Orcus simply believed that one of his rival demon lords had hired a large force of daemonic mercenaries to test his defenses. He quickly abandoned this idea when the size of the invading force became clear, and that it contained no demonic masters. In fact, the daemons were led by one of their own, an enigmatic creature that stood at the front of its army, slaying demons and undead by the droves with a massive, black-bladed scythe.

Confident in his own domain, and with a massive army of his own to call upon, Orcus had not been overly concerned about the invading horde of daemons. In truth, he had been simply curious — what could possibly motivate a daemon to invade the domain of an Abyssal ruler? Such a thing was unheard of. Daemons *served* other demons and devils as mercenaries; they did not gather in large numbers and seek to conquer the realms of other fiends. For thousands of years the Archodaemon, the singular most

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powerful daemon in Gehenna, had kept his race fractured and disjointed. Daemons only banded together in small mercenary units, selling their services to archfiends in both the Nine Hells and the Abyss. The last time a daemonic army, of any size, had gathered was so long ago that not even the most ancient of demon lords or archdevils remembered it.

But now, the unlikely truth was that he, Orcus, Prince of the Undead, was the first demon lord in history to suffer an invasion by daemonic forces. He had responded to the threat to his realm in the customary fashion. He had unleashed his own Abyssal horde of demons, undead, and other horrors upon the invaders. So certain was he that no foe could defeat him in his own realm that Orcus did not even leave his black citadel in the heart of Thenebrenar to watch the battle. At least, he did not until reports came flooding back, carried by desperate demonic couriers, that his initial force had been utterly destroyed by the interloping daemons. It was then that Orcus realized that there was a chance, however infinitesimal, that he might be defeated in his own realm. This roused the great demon lord from his abode, and he had hastily made his way to the battlefield.

Orcus arrived to confront the invading daemons amidst twenty thousand demonic and undead troops. His great litter floated within the middle of his army, like a warship borne upon a river of monsters. The daemons had invaded Thenebrenar where it bordered the domain of another demon lord, a vassal of Orcus called Agog. This area was a riot of jagged crags and deep gullies filled with acidic pools. The torturous landscape faded back into Agog's realm where it became a burning inferno of active volcanoes and sulfurous rain. The daemonic army filled the bleak countryside, clinging to the rocky peaks like great fiendish spiders and filling every gorge and valley with its mass.

It was clearly evident how the daemons had managed to gain access to Thenebrenar. Agog's horned head was firmly affixed to the end of a pike and held aloft by a cacodaemon standing at the fore of the invading force.

Though Orcus was outnumbered ten to one, the unshakable confidence of a demon lord had dictated his actions, and he had sent his horde, howling and bloodthirsty, crashing into the arrayed daemons. Orcus's demons and undead had done well in the first few minutes of the battle, smashing the daemonic front line with frenzied aggression. The daemons had fallen back, shaken by the ferocity of their enemy, but the advantage gained in that initial onslaught was only fleeting. Suddenly the ranks of daemons had parted

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down the middle to disgorge a terrible abomination. It charged through the ranks on all fours, a scaly nightmare that awakened a primordial fear in the hearts of every demon on the battlefield — including their master.

The Beast stood upon its back legs when it reached the demonic front line, rearing up to an impossible height. Like a small ambulatory building, it surged into Orcus's forces, snatching up demons in its two great claws and stuffing the unfortunate fiends into its cavernous maw. Spell, steel, and claw could find no purchase upon the titanic Beast's hide, and it had sent Orcus's Abyssal horde fleeing back to their master in shattered disarray.

With his army in tatters, Orcus had chosen the only other option available to him. He attempted to destroy the invading force of daemons by slaying the Archodaemon that led it. The great demon lord, surrounded by his elite guard of twenty balors, had pierced the daemonic line and challenged the gaunt, faceless fiend that stood alone, and apparently vulnerable, directing the actions of his army.

Orcus and his balors had descended upon the Archodaemon with terrible ferocity, smiting the enigmatic fiend with spells, and slashing at his body with iron-hard claws and blades of living flame. The spells rolled off of the Archodaemon harmlessly, and his great, black-bladed scythe caught each enemy blade or claw before it touched his flesh. And then, the great daemon had taken the offensive, and his fearsome weapon had cut down the twenty elite balors with a cold precision that left a jumble of dismembered corpses quivering in his wake. This left only Orcus, alone and unguarded, to face the mighty Archodaemon.

To his credit, the demon lord had hefted his mighty, skull-headed mace and charged into the fray, smashing his foe with the strength of his ponderously large body. But even Orcus's terrible weapon could not bring down his opponent, and the Archodaemon had swatted away each earth-shaking strike with contemptuous ease.

There was little doubt that the Archodaemon could have slain Orcus then, but instead the great fiend had simply disengaged, vanishing into the swell of the vast daemonic army. This left Orcus with little choice but to flee, an ignoble prospect to be sure, but a necessary one, lest he be torn asunder by the claws and fangs of countless, bloodthirsty daemons. Of course, he had first tried to use his demonic sorcery to vanish away, teleporting across the plane to the safety of his bleak citadel, but curiously, he had found the magic he had relied upon for eons conspicuously absent.

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And so, Orcus, Prince of the Undead and one of the mightiest demon lords in the Abyss was forced to push his great, flabby body into a dead run, slinking back to what remained of his army like a whipped dog.

Now, all but a few remnants of Orcus's army had either fled or lay dead not more than a few hundred yards from their master. From his litter the demon lord inclined his head to survey what forces remained to him. It was a pitiful sight. Around him sprawled a few hundred badly wounded demons and thoroughly damaged undead. On the upside, these survivors were the cream of his fighting force, powerful fiends and ancient walking dead.

Like their master, the demons that had survived the short, ugly battle with the daemonic invaders and their terrible beast of war had somehow lost their innate power of teleportation, and those that could flee by foot or wing had already done so. Orcus himself had no idea how the daemons and their master had stripped him and his demons of this ability, but here they were, helpless and lame, at the mercy of the enemy.

However, the daemons had not pressed their advantage, and were simply milling about like a great colony of ants. Only their huge war beast, a creature that even Orcus could not name, had advanced away from the bulk of the army. It was now sitting on its massive haunches in the middle of the battlefield, shoveling handfuls of slain demon, daemons, and undead into its vast, fanged mouth. The ominous sounds of bone, scales, and other organic material being slowly ground to paste and swallowed drifted across the sliver of Abyssal landscape that separated the two opposing forces.

Orcus watched the massive war beast contently chewing up the remains of his Abyssal horde, and again felt that unfamiliar pang of fear. It seemed as if an icy finger of doubt and despair ran up his spine to drill the unavoidable reality into his brain. The demon lord glared across the battlefield, resting his eyes upon the architect of his downfall — the tall, gaunt Archodaemon that had, inexplicably, chosen to bring him low.

Despite the collapse of all he had built over the millennia, Orcus found that he very much wanted to remain among alive. The fact that the daemons had not swept forward and destroyed him and his pitiful band left the demon lord with a scant hope. And in this moment, it was a hope that he chose to act upon.

"Lagrazog," Orcus said, turning his head towards a massive, gray-skinned balor squatting near the litter. "Come here."

The balor rose to its feet, wincing from the dozens of ghastly lacerations,

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bruises, and gouges that marred its powerful body. As it stood, the reason the balor survived such mistreatment of its flesh became obvious. Grafts of greasy, gray and black flesh had been stitched into its demonic body like patches on a quilt. These swatches of undead flesh made the demon even tougher and more resilient, allowing it to shrug off damage that would kill or incapacitate a standard member of its race.

"Master," the balor said, moving to stand next to the litter. "What is your desire?"

Orcus said nothing, but reached out with one flabby, bejeweled hand and laid it upon his minion's breast. The demon lord spoke a single, guttural word and a crackling flare of black energy suddenly enshrouded the balor, writhing around its body like a tiny, necrotic thunderstorm. A rapturous expression of pure pleasure overtook the demon's face, and the rents in its body began to close of their own accord, the half-dead flesh knitting together under the power of Orcus's dread touch. In seconds, Lagrazog stood whole and hale again, all signs of his wounds erased by powerful, necromantic magic.

"Better?" Orcus said.

"Yes, master. Thank you," Lagrazog replied, sighing deeply.

"Now, I have a task for you, and it is vital that you follow my instructions. Understood?"

"Of course, master. Your will is my will," the balor acquiesced.

"Excellent. Obsequious as always," Orcus said, and his black lips split in a smile, revealing the crusted, yellow tusks rotting in the cankerous orifice of his mouth. "I want you to go down to the daemonic army and seek out their leader. The Archodaemon with the scythe."

"Am I to slay him for you?"

The smile on Orcus's bestial face disappeared, and his eyes blazed with sudden wrath. "If I was unable to slay him, *fool,* then how in all the multiverse could one such as you hope to succeed where I failed?"

Lagrazog retreated a step, one taloned hand snaking, unconsciously, to the haft of the great iron mace that hung at his waist. The venom in his master's words he knew well, and such rancor usually preceded a violent, and usually lethal, outburst from the great fiend.

With difficulty, Orcus's regained his composure and his expression changed again. The flames of rage died as a dull lump of fear welled up in his throat. When he spoke again, his tone was flat and lifeless. "Lagrazog,

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come here, I will not harm you." He beckoned the balor forward with one hand, coaxing the frightened demon forward like a skittish animal.

"Of course, master," Lagrazog said, cautiously stepping within easy reach of his master again. "Your servant begs forgiveness for any offense it has offered." The balor bowed.

"Just deliver my message to the Archodaemon, and I will forget your presumption," Orcus said.

"What message shall I deliver, master?" Lagrazog asked. "And will the daemons not attempt to slay me when I deliver it?"

Orcus smiled at the question. If it was an army of demons he was sending Lagrazog into, then, yes, he would likely be torn apart as soon as he set foot on enemy soil. But these were daemons, and while they were not chained by the lawful protocols and rigid thinking that plagued the race of devils, their long history as fiendish mercenaries meant they would probably not kill a messenger sent under a flag of truce. Probably.

"No, Lagrazog, they won't harm you, I am sure of it," Orcus half-lied. "I want you to tell the Archodaemon that I wish to speak with him." Orcus grimaced, as if the words that were to come next tasted of bile and bitterness. "Tell him that I wish to discuss possible terms for a truce and a cessation of hostilities."

"A cessation of hostilities?" Lagrazog said, not believing what he was hearing. "Master, why?"

"Look around you, *fool*," Orcus hissed, spreading his arms wide to encompass the devastation that surrounded them. "We are beaten, and if the daemons and their master wish to march into the heart of Thenebrenar and drown my citadel in stale, daemonic piss, there is little that you or I can do to stop it."

"But you are a demon prince, master," Lagrazog insisted. "How can you be defeated in your own realm?"

Orcus gnashed his teeth in frustration and fought down the urge to twist Lagrazog's head from his shoulders. The balor's confusion was not unfounded, however. Demon lords were the ultimate masters of their domains. Each commanded the very fabric of an Abyssal layer, molding it to their will and shaping it at their whim. Unfortunately, whatever power the invading Archodaemon commanded had stripped this ability from Orcus as well, and he now felt as impotent as the lowliest dretch.

"Just deliver the message, Lagrazog," Orcus said after a long pause. "Or

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shall I find a servant that is willing to do my bidding without so many questions?" The threat was unmistakable, and Orcus was an eyelash away from a murderous frenzy.

"Yes master, forgive me," Lagrazog said with a bow. He spread his massive wings and leapt into the stale Abyssal air.

Orcus watched the balor make the short jaunt across the corpse-strewn battlefield and land a dozen yards from the front line of the daemonic army. The tall Archodaemon stepped out to meet the balor, carrying his scythe casually over one shoulder. The two fiends spoke for a moment, and then Lagrazog turned and took to the wing again. The Archodaemon, alone and unguarded, began to walk across the battlefield, pausing only at the foot of the great war beast as it continued to messily devour the dead and dying. The Archodaemon, small and seemingly insignificant next to the towering abomination, placed his hand on the Beast's leathery hide and spoke a single word. In response, the Beast swallowed the massive gob of pulped fiend it had just stuffed into its maw, turned, and lumbered off in the direction of the daemonic army. The Archodaemon continued across the battlefield towards Orcus and what remained of his Abyssal horde.

Lagrazog landed next to Orcus's litter, the balor's face fixed with a puzzled expression as he stepped forward to address his master. "The Archodaemon is coming to treat with you, master," he said, shaking his head.

"I can see that," Orcus said, impatiently. "What did he say to you out there?"

"It was odd, master," Lagrazog said. "I expected to face scorn at best, and the violent ire of thousands of daemons at worst, but the Archodaemon was very diplomatic, even cordial. He said that he would be honored to meet with the 'Great Orcus's and discuss terms."

"Very well, Lagrazog, you have done well," Orcus said, dismissing the balor with a wave of his hand. He watched Lagrazog walk away and melt into the motley horde of wounded demons clustered around his litter, and wondered if he should not keep Lagrazog close while he met with the Archodaemon. Orcus dismissed this thought immediately; if the Archodaemon trudging alone across the battlefield wanted to destroy him, the great fiend had certainly proved he could do it with relative ease. Still, the fact that this interloper came alone, unguarded, gnawed at Orcus's pride, and his mind boiled with anguish and rage at his impotence.

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The Archodaemon advanced slowly, almost floating up the small hill where Orcus and his retainers and servants waited. The daemon lord was a tall, gaunt creature, with a massive, ovular head, from which stared two great luminous eyes. Beyond these orbs of liquid green fire there was nothing else; no mouth, no nose, nothing but a blank canvas of ebony skin. Despite this alien physiology, the Archodaemon radiated a palpable confidence and power, and something else, something Orcus could not put a name to. As the gaunt fiend drew nearer, the pallid grip of terror clenched around his heart, and Orcus knew, with utmost certainty, that beyond the relatively benign exterior of the invader there lurked a primal wickedness that made the demon lord's own evil look petty and ill-formed in comparison.

An ancient evil approached, and Orcus was suddenly overtaken with a mad desire to flee, to remove himself from the hideous gaze of those two great, burning eyes. But he could not. All eyes were upon him. The last vestiges of his pride and power huddled around him, looking to the demon lord, their master, to make some sense of a situation that was both unprecedented and inconceivable. And so, Orcus climbed from his litter, took up his skull-headed mace, and strode upon fear-palsied legs to treat with doom.

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Pyrak wished he could close his eyes, wished he could shut out the smothering darkness of the void with a darkness of his own. He ached to feel the small muscles around his eyelids retract, to hear the feathers about his head rustle with the minute movement. He ached to draw breath into his lungs and spread his wings, but even these simple pleasures were denied him. He had neither eyes to close nor feathers to rustle. In fact, he had no physical body whatsoever.

In life, Pyrak had been a demon lord, possessed of awesome physical power as well as the temporal might that came with ruling an entire layer of the Abyss. But all that power was gone. Pyrak was dead, yet his soul knew no rest. He had died wielding the magical sword, Fiendbleeder, a weapon wrought of sorcery so potent the sword itself had a mind. And upon the demon lord's death, that mind had made Pyrak's soul its prisoner.

Now, the former demon lord existed in a state that he could hardly define. He had consciousness, certainly, but his imprisonment within the terrible, sentient sword left him in a strange limbo between existence and nonexistence. When the sword desired to communicate with Pyrak, the demon lord was given the illusion of form and substance, seemingly inhabiting a body that was in every sense his own. However, he knew those moments for the falsehoods that they were. In the dream-like world *Fiendbleeder* created for him, nothing was real, and the delusion of physical existence was just another way for the sentient blade to gloat, or to mock him with even greater illusions.

The mind of the sword itself would also assume a physical form in their "conversations."

So far, the sword had favored the body of a strange being Pyrak had met briefly before his death, a man-turned-demon known as Hazergal. A human wizard in life, Hazergal had met his own end on the mortal plane shortly before Pyrak's own demise. The capricious wickedness of Hazergal's soul had caused it to travel to the Abyss after his mortal death, where it was translated into the form of a lowly breed of demon.

Yet the form Fiendbleeder chose was not Hazergal the demon, but

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Hazergal the man. And as the setting for these conversations, it used the throne room from which the mortal archmage had ruled his mortal empire. Somehow it had pulled the image of the place from Hazergal's memory, and it was the backdrop it used whenever it wished to taunt Pyrak. Like a spoiled child-king, *Fiendbleeder* would sit in Hazergal's form upon his throne, and force Pyrak to kneel or otherwise subjugate himself before it. Then it would regale its former master with tales of its own "glorious" past, highlighting particularly the instances when it had brought other demon lords to their destruction.

But *Fiendbleeder's* moods were fickle, and sometimes it left Pyrak, horribly conscious and aware, in a prison of emptiness from which there was no escape. Despite the sword's mocking, Pyrak yearned for those welcome interludes where he was allowed to see, hear, and feel, even if it was only an illusion. He had become obsequious, even fawning, during his "audiences" with *Fiendbleeder*, hoping to maintain the sword's interest and extend his time, even for a few precious moments, in a sane, physical reality.

In fact, recently, Pyrak had played the part of the broken slave so well that *Fiendbleeder* had allowed him to dwell in the created world of Hazergal's throne room, even when the sword was not present. In addition, Pyrak was allowed to view the outside world, looking through the misty envelope of *Fiendbleeder's* mind to living world beyond. In the physical realm outside this prison, the sword had been hung as trophy in another throne room, that of the newly risen demon lord Hedrenatherax, who had slain Pyrak in his rise to power. For a time, Pyrak had been to distract himself from the unending torment of his state by watching the usurper's frustrated attempts to solidify his newly acquired position. Unfortunately, this reprieve from the stark nothingness of his prison had abruptly ended.

The sword had been enraged when last Pyrak was allowed to taste the sweet fruit of light, sound, and physical form. Hazergal had come very close to completing a large part of *Fiendbleeder's* plan by simply taking the sword from where it hung in Hedrenatherax's throne room. This would have allowed the sword to exert its considerable influence over the rapidly evolving Hazergal, guiding the former mortal's destiny in a direction that suited its own designs. But the untimely arrival of Hedrenatherax and the enigmatic devil Gemnez had foiled the opportunity, and *Fiendbleeder's* rage had filled Pyrak's world with pain, and then darkness.

There was no way for Pyrak to track the passage of time, although it

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seemed a long while since *Fiendbleeder* had summoned him from the void. The sword was likely still fuming over the loss of such a prime opportunity, and it deigned to punish the one creature that remained for it to torment. Pyrak guessed that *Fiendbleeder* had somehow realized that it could inflict no greater torture upon the former demon lord than this horrid state of nothingness, where he dwelled with only his own self-loathing and despair to keep him company.

Occasionally, while he endured what could be an eternity of darkness, he thought he sensed, somewhere on the edge of his perception, another presence. A fleeting glimmer of another mind that, in his desperation for a reprieve from his formless interment, he flailed about hungrily for, only to find that it had slipped away. Despite the horror and loss he felt each time he was unable to locate the "other," it still left him with some hope, however infinitesimal, that he was not alone.

It seemed that each time the other presence manifested, it was stronger, more confident, although just as elusive. Despite his inability to reckon time, Pyrak felt that the presence came to him more frequently, as if it was somehow interested in the tortured demon lord. Of course, Pyrak had little choice but to accept the possibility that there was no other presence, and that his soul had simply begun the steep decline into madness. But such thoughts availed him little, and now, as he floated in the pervading silence of whatever dark corner of *Fiendbleeder's* mind he had been thrust into, he felt the presence again.

If Pyrak had had a body it would have been quivering with excitement. He forced himself to control the surging hope and anxiety that had been generated by the other's reappearance. Tentatively, he stretched out with his mind, attempting to assuage whatever trepidation the alien presence had about revealing itself fully.

Are you there? Pyrak thought into the smothering emptiness. *Please, just talk to me,* he begged, disgusted at his own loneliness and desperation but unable to control it.

Pyrak waited, hope fading with each moment there was no reply. The former demon lord suddenly felt rage, hot and acrid, well up within him. How could this presence simply ignore him? Why would it not respond?

Damn you! I am here! His mind howled into the darkness, and then suddenly, the world was drowned in a flood of light and sound. Pyrak gasped at the sudden maelstrom, and then, with great pleasure and relief, realized

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that he had drawn air into his lungs with that reflexive intake of breath.

He had a body now. Or at least, Pyrak had the facsimile his mind created for him when *Fiendbleeder* allowed him to take physical form. However, the expected onyx and crimson throne room that the sword so often manifested was conspicuously absent, as was the gloating, bearded form of *Fiendbleeder* itself. The former demon lord found himself a far less grandiose environment — and in the presence of a far less impressive individual.

The feathers atop Pyrak's head brushed the low ceiling of a small oblong cavern, perhaps forty feet long. The walls were unworked gray stone, devoid of color and texture. The floor beneath the demon lord's feet was sandy, and he reveled in the simple sensation of the fine granules grinding softly between his taloned toes.

There was light provided by a guttering fire in a shallow depression near the north end of the cavern. Hunched over this fire was once of the most wretched creatures Pyrak had ever laid eyes on. It was a malformed humanoid, standing barely five feet tall on two squat, pillar-like legs, and looking for all the world like a mound of squashed, brown clay. Two limbs hung from its lumpy torso, each ending in a clumsy three-fingered hand, and a head, which resembled nothing so much as a smashed melon, wobbled upon a thick, ungainly neck. For a face the creature offered only two small eyes, like tiny black pebbles pushed into the lumpy ruin of its head, and a wide lipless mouth, which was currently turned upward in a smile.

"I'm sorry this is the best I can provide for us," the creature said suddenly, spreading its fat, sausage-like arms. "I just can't remember much more than this."

Pyrak strode the short distance across the sandy floor to stand over the squat little creature. He stared down at it, disgusted by its malformed body, but nevertheless excited beyond all measure just to have another being to speak with. "Who are you?" he asked.

The creature stared up at him, its slack face still creased in a smile. "My you're a big one aren't you? And so well made. You must be new," it said.

Pyrak squatted down next to the fire, which burned despite the fact that there was nothing to fuel it. "Please," he said, calmly. "Tell me who you are. What is your name?"

"My name?" The creature, suddenly frowned, and its wide, shapeless brow furrowed. It was silent for a moment, as if the simple question

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required much effort. "Ah! That's right!" it suddenly cried, happily. "My name is, or was, Chemosh."

"Chemosh," Pyrak repeated. The name was oddly familiar to him, although he wasn't certain why.

"Yes, Chemosh," the creature said again, smiling. "I'm sorry, I haven't used a name in so long; most of us have forgotten them by now, you know, especially the first. It's so hard to recall those little things, but they're so precious, so precious …"

Pyrak stared at his curious host, wondering what in the Abyss he was talking about, but he couldn't help but be utterly engrossed by Chemosh's words. "What is this place?"

"Hmm? Oh, this?" Chemosh said, absently. "It's just what I can remember. I guess it's a cave … maybe I lived in one at one time. The fire is new. I was never able to do that before. How do you like it?"

"It's wonderful," Pyrak said, and meant it. The tiny bit of heat radiating from the flames was pure ecstasy on his sensory-deprived body.

"I'm sorry I couldn't bring you here sooner," Chemosh said, frowning. "I just wasn't sure if you were real or not. The others didn't think so, but when I felt your anger, I knew you were there. It's been a long time since we had a new soul to talk to."

"A new soul …" Pyrak muttered aloud, and then the realization crashed into him. "You're one of *Fiendbleeder's* former masters, aren't you. You were a demon lord, like myself."

Chemosh frowned again, and his face suddenly sharpened, became more distinct. For an instant, Pyrak saw something powerful and ancient staring back across the fire, the face of an archfiend, horned and majestic. It was gone almost immediately, sinking back into the doughy insubstantial mass that was all Chemosh could remember of his former self.

"That seems right," Chemosh said slowly. "I don't remember much, but sometimes there are faces and names and places in my mind, but they don't mean anything." The little creature's frown deepened. "Maybe I was like you once," he said. "Strong and beautiful; yes, like a lord, a *demon lord*."

"The sword has forgotten about you, hasn't it?" Pyrak said. "Grown bored with you and cast you aside. I wonder if it even knows that you linger still, fading away into the darkness of its mind like an old, tired memory."

It was monstrously cruel, even for one so wicked as *Fiendbleeder*. Pyrak was no stranger to cruelty. He had thrived on it, created it, and nurtured it.

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As a demon lord, cruelty had been his stock and trade, but there had always been a purpose behind it. But this, this slow consumption and eventual extinction, was unnatural. Pyrak was suddenly sick with fear as he stared across the fire at the misshapen remains of what was once a powerful demon lord — this was his fate.

"It has forgotten about all of us," Chemosh said, sadly. "But we remain, losing the pieces of ourselves through the sieve of time, bit by bit. Most of us cannot even create so paltry a vision as this cave, or take a form more lovely than what you see now."

"How many others are there?" Pyrak asked. *Fiendbleeder* had existed for so long, it could have easily devoured the souls of dozens, maybe hundreds of demon lords and other archfiends before it found its way to Pyrak.

"Oh, I'm not sure," Chemosh said. "It's hard to distinguish one from the other at times. Sometimes, it's almost as if we are all part of the same thing, one great mind slowly fading into the darkness."

"Can't *Fiendbleeder* sense this?" Pyrak swiveled his head to indicate the small cave, "This *construct* you've created?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Chemosh answered. "This meeting between you and I is happening within the confines of *our* minds. It is the one bastion that remains to us, and I think not even *Fiendbleeder* can enter this domain, feeble as it is, without our leave.

"But what about me?" Pyrak asked. "*Fiendbleeder* is not done with me yet."

"The sword can likely summon you into its own thought whenever it likes," Chemosh said shrugging its malformed shoulders.

Pyrak nodded, suddenly relieved that *Fiendbleeder* perhaps was not be able to detect his meeting with Chemosh, and therefore deprive him of the simple pleasure of conversation with another intelligent being. The demon lord stared around at the drab confines of the cave, wondering. "How have you created this place, Chemosh?" he asked.

"I don't know how, I just visualize it and it appears," he said. "As I said, it must be a place that I was familiar with. Although, if you say I was a demon lord, I would think I could muster better accommodations than this," Chemosh smiled, weakly. "Unfortunately, this is all I can remember now."

Closing his eyes, Pyrak visualized the grandeur of his floating palace in the Abyss. He saw the ivory columns in his throne room, each painstakingly carved with detailed images of cavorting demons. In his mind's eye he

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stood beneath one of the soaring columns, as it rose to meet the glass ceiling above, through which he saw purple clouds drifting lazily in the Abyssal sky. He imagined reaching out to feel the cool stone beneath his fingers as he traced the raised image of a particularly lovely succubus. The stony scrape of his talons against the stone intoned musically in his ears, and he was suddenly overcome with the simple happiness of such a fond memory. The picture in his mind grew more distinct, and other details of his throne room began to take shape. His throne, the marble floors reflecting his image like a polished mirror, the smell of blood and the dust as it blew upon the endless winds of Vrack, all of it — he was home. He sank deeper into the memory, letting it fold about him like a warm blanket. He could have stayed there indefinitely, but Chemosh's gasp brought him out of his reverie with a start.

Pyrak opened his eyes and saw one of the pillars of his throne room before him, its carvings gleaming in the guttering firelight. The base of the pillar was sunk into the sandy floor and its truncated top melded with the stone above. The carving nearest him was of the succubus, the detail so fine he could actually see her sharp teeth through the full-lipped smile she offered seductively to all who viewed her.

"Oh, lovely!" Chemosh exclaimed and waddled over to the pillar. He ran his hands over the creamy stone; his stumpy fingers found each carving and traced its outline, and with each new discovery he breathed out a sigh of such rapturous joy that Pyrak smiled in spite of himself.

"This is one of the pillars that held up my throne room," Pyrak said. " I paid nearly ten thousand larvae to have them constructed by the best mortal stonemason that ever lived. The night hag that sold me his soul told me I was getting a bargain. I didn't believed her until I saw the mason's work." Pyrak stood and placed one hand on the pillar. "This one was my favorite."

"Thank you for *this*," Chemosh breathed. "It has been so long since I have had anything new to see or feel." The stunted demon continued to caress the pillar; his ugly face alight with an almost child-like joy.

Pyrak watched Chemosh for a few moments and felt the dark stirrings of opportunity swirl within his mind. "Chemosh, I think I can create more than just this pillar. Would you be interested in seeing something else?"

Chemosh stared open-mouthed at Pyrak, his small, stony eyes suddenly hungry with desire. "Oh yes, please, show me more," he said.

"And I shall," Pyrak nodded. "But I want to meet the others you spoke

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of. I want to show them what I have shown you."

"The others …" Chemosh said, hesitantly. "I can't take you to them, they must come to you, as I did."

Pyrak was silent for a moment, his mind whirling with possibilities. If the souls of other demon lords resided with *Fiendbleeder*, however eroded they may be, then perhaps they could be set to some purpose, some direction that would serve him. The former demon lord stared at the pillar he had conjured out of his mind, and his great, beak spilt into a ghastly smile. "They will come, Chemosh. I will give something grand to look upon. I will give them a memory that will make them remember what and who they were."

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The demon lord Hedrenatherax collapsed into his throne with a sigh, resting his battered body against the rusting iron. He breathed in the choking, green smoke that poured from the throne room's guttering braziers. For once in his long, driven life, he was content with what he had *now*. However, this realization had likely come too late for the demon lord. After recent events, he stood to lose all that he had painstakingly built.

"Comfortable, my lord?" Gemnez asked, mockingly, from the foot of Hedrenatherax's throne. "Shall I fetch the court jester to entertain his majesty?"

Hedrenatherax stared down at the obese devil, whose biting wit never seemed to falter, even in the face of calamitous adversity. He had learned recently that Gemnez was far more useful — and far more deceitful — than he had first suspected. Despite the rogue devil's newfound utility, the demon lord found Gemnez's sarcasm grated on him to no end.

"You are in my throne room now, toad. I command here," Hedrenatherax growled. "If I wish to rest upon my throne for a moment after nearly being stabbed to death by a night hag assassin, running for my life through an army of daemons, and to top it all off, toad, learning that my short, ineffective reign as the Lord of Vrack is about to become very much shorter, then, by Orcus's hairy balls, I shall sit here and you will *be silent for one gods be damned minute*!"

As he delivered his tirade, Hedrenatherax had half-risen out of his chair. His huge, taloned left hand clenched the throne with white-knuckled rage, while the long, bony scythe of his right arm gouged a furrow into the rusting, pitted metal.

Gemnez took a step back, so great a presence was the demon lord's rage. But then he smiled, his garish red lips splitting to reveal the rows of needle-like teeth beyond. "My lord, I *do* apologize for intruding upon your reverie, but the matters at hand may require you to lift your ponderous, scaly ass from yon seat and take a hand in saving your own miserable life."

The rogue devil did not yell, bark, or scream, but his words carried a venomous anger that struck Hedrenatherax like a blow. The demon lord

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blinked and then slowly sank back into his throne. He stared at Gemnez through narrowed slits wanting to hate the fat slug of a devil, but found that he could not. Something has transpired between them during their harrowing experience and flight from Har'Drok. It could not be called friendship — such a thing was truly beyond the comprehension of both demon and devil — but still, a grudging respect for one another now existed. Despite his anger and growing feeling of impotence, Hedrenatherax was glad to have Gemnez by his side.

The huge demon lord smiled, bearing his tusks in a manner that would have been horrifying to any mortal creature. "Ah, toad, what has become of us? There was a time when I would have cut you from neck to nuts for daring to speak to me in such a manner, and now all I can muster is the startling realization that you're probably right."

"Well, my lord, like all couples forced to weather adversity together, I like to think that we have *grown,* as individuals, from our experiences." Gemnez grinned, sarcastically. "I mean, I must admit, however grudgingly, that you are no longer the backwards idiot who claimed this plane from Pyrak. I like to think that I have had something to do with that."

"Hah!" Hedrenatherax snorted. "You may be right, toad. Trying to discover where and when you might be planning to rake me over the coals has certainly sharpened my wits, and for that, I thank you."

"Of course, my lord. I live to serve you in whatever capacity is most advantageous to your grace." Gemnez bowed, obsequiously.

Suddenly Hedrenatherax sobered, his smile fading into his normal, tusked frown. "How long before Yaghur Hod moves against us?"

Gemnez shook his head and sighed. "I know not, but it certainly won't be long. Likely he will establish his dominion over his own people before moving against his enemies."

"Cannot Ozynthraxus resist him and buy us some time? Perhaps we could aid the current Archodaemon."

Looking up at Hedrenatherax, Gemnez chuckled. "By the gods, Hedrenatherax, you *have* gotten smarter. I would have suggested the very same thing had I not received a certain piece of news from one of my spies upon Gehenna this very day."

Hedrenatherax tried not to smile. He did not want to show how pleased he was to have impressed Gemnez. It was a foolish thing to want to demonstrate to the fat devil that he was worthy of his rule and dominion,

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but he craved it nonetheless. "What have you learned?"

"Ozynthraxus is dead, by the hand of Yaghur Hod. Our enemy now controls the entire race of daemon-kind."

"What do you mean, he *controls* them?" Hedrenatherax asked, incredulously. "I've worked with daemonic mercenaries for millennia, and I can safely say the only thing that controls them is profit."

Gemnez nodded. "Normally, I would agree with you; however, the daemons were not always the fractious group of mercenaries they are today. Long ago, under the rule of Yaghur Hod, they were a cohesive force, an unstoppable army of fiends greater than any army a demon lord, or even Asmodeus himself, could muster."

"And now?" Hedrenatherax prodded.

"Under the line of Archodaemons, of which Ozynthraxus was the last, the daemons were bent to a purpose other than planar domination. Each Archodaemon bears a powerful item known as the *Archonatrix;* in fact he must claim it from his predecessor in order to claim the title of Archodaemon. The *Archonatrix* allows an Archodaemon to influence the minds and actions of daemons across the multiverse. In the past ten millennia or so, this purpose has simply been to keep the daemonic coffers filled with larvae and other valuable things. Archodaemons arise from a group of unique daemons who stand at the top of the daemonic hierarchy. Every one of these unique daemons commands those beneath him to sell their services, as mercenaries, to the various lower planar factions in need of additional military power. These commands, in turn, are bolstered by the influence exerted through the *Archonatrix* by the current Archodaemon."

"And now, Yaghur Hod has the *Archonatrix* and can push the daemons towards another purpose," Hedrenatherax said.

"Yes, exactly. And that purpose will first be the acquisition of what he has lost." Gemnez pointed one flabby finger at the naked blade of the ancient sword *Fiendbleeder*. It had hung behind Hedrenatherax's throne since he had claimed it as a trophy from his predecessor, the fallen demon lord Pyrak. "After that, who knows? One can only guess at the machinations of a creature as ancient and terrible as Yaghur Hod, but have no doubt, he will be here soon, and as we are now, we cannot hope to resist him."

Hedrenatherax sighed and clenched his fist. He had never felt so impotent and unimportant. Here he was, at last having achieved the aim

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of every demon in the Abyss, only to watch it crumble away. "Then what shall we do, toad," he said, quietly.

"We are in desperate need of allies," Gemnez said. "In order to even dream of defeating Yaghur Hod we must amass a force of demons like no other. A grand army of fiends to rival his own."

"And how are we to do that?" Hedrenatherax snorted derisively. "You have seen what forces I command. Where shall we get other demons to join our cause?"

Toying with the massive spiked chain wound around his expansive middle, Gemnez seemed to mull this over. He scratched his bulbous chin idly. "I must give it some thought, but we do have two assets at our disposal, both quite considerable."

"Oh really, toad," Hedrenatherax said. "What have you been hiding from me?"

Gemnez smiled. "Well, my lord, I have had dealings with Pazuzu —"

"*Pazuzu*!" Hedrenatherax suddenly thundered, rage staining his eyes an ugly, visceral red. "When was this?"

"Oh, calm yourself," Gemnez said, irritably. "It is not as if you were unaware that I was acting without your consent upon my own designs. And besides, things have changed, and now the clandestine dealings I had made to work against you, now work for you."

The throne room filled with a horrid scraping of as Hedrenatherax ground his teeth in frustration, but he held his rage in check. Swallowing his anger was something he was learning to do on a regular basis these days. And though he wished only to lash out and destroy that which rankled him, he had learned that restraint had its merits. "Fine," he hissed. "Tell me more."

"Very well," Gemnez continued. "Pazuzu agreed to shelter Hazergal from you in exchange for something quite important to him." Again, Gemnez nodded towards *Fiendbleeder*.

"What? The sword?" Hedrenatherax asked. "Why does he want *Fiendbleeder*? Surely he must know what the damned thing did to Pyrak."

"Oh, yes, he is quite aware of the influence *Fiendbleeder* can exercise upon its wielder, but the Prince of the Air has no desire to wield the weapon. He simply wants to destroy it."

"That's it?" Hedrenatherax asked, obviously dubious of Pazuzu's intentions. "He will aid us in return for the chance to destroy the sword?"

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"Yes, I think he will," Gemnez answered. "However, we certainly cannot allow Pazuzu to take possession of *Fiendbleeder* while we are still in peril. As you can guess, there is no trusting a creature as duplicitous and well-versed in planar machinations as the esteemed Pazuzu."

"This is good, toad," Hedrenatherax conceded. "Despite the fact that you planned to betray me, there is no doubt that Pazuzu would make for a formidable ally. Does he know what he will be facing?"

"Well, no," Gemnez said. "But I believe his desire to see *Fiendbleeder* destroyed will override any concerns he has for his own safety and that of his realm. Plus, a haughty, arrogant creature such as Pazuzu is certainly not going to be convinced there is any real threat from something so ridiculous as a rogue Archodaemon."

Letting Gemnez's words soak in, Hedrenatherax sat silent for a moment. A thought suddenly struck him, and he beckoned Gemnez closer with a crooked finger. The fat devil complied warily, creeping up to the throne — and within striking distance of Hedrenatherax's scythe arm — with more than a little hesitation.

"*Come here, toad,*" Hedrenatherax whispered, fiercely, irritated at Gemnez's reticence.

The fat fiend complied. When he stood at the base of the throne, Hedrenatherax leaned close to the devil's great, reptilian face. "*Can it hear us?*" he whispered.

"*What?* Fiendbleeder*?*" Gemnez whispered back.

Hedrenatherax nodded.

Gemnez took a step back, and chuckled. "There is no need to whisper," he said. "Despite the sword's power over its wielder, at the end of the day, it is simply a sword, a tool, useless and impotent until brought to bear by another."

"Very well," Hedrenatherax said, returning to his normal speaking voice and feeling quite foolish for having tried to deceive the inert chunk of metal hanging in his wall. "Then we shall hold the sword as proof of Pazuzu's assistance. Since you seem to have cultivated a relationship with the illustrious prince, I will leave you to work out any further details."

"My lord honors me with his trust in this matter," Gemnez simpered.

"Enough with your japes, toad," Hedrenatherax said dismissively. "Your fat is hanging in the fire as much as my own. Cock this up at your own peril."

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"I cannot argue with you there," Gemnez conceded. "I will do my utmost to secure an agreeable alliance with Pazuzu."

"Good." Hedrenatherax said, imperiously. "You spoke of another asset, toad."

"Yes: Hazergal," Gemnez answered simply.

"That freak?" Hedrenatherax scoffed. "How can he help us?" The demon lord glanced around his throne room, suddenly. "Where has he gone, toad? Have you given him and his pet the run of Hedrax?"

"I thought it best to let Hazergal and Azadan come to grips with the perils that are facing us all on their own, as we are doing now," Gemnez replied. "Especially in light of your disdain for the mortal."

"Disdain?" Hedrenatherax said. "Oh, toad, you misunderstand me. It is not simple disdain I bear for your pet freak. It is outright hatred. Unless you can prove to me that he will serve some useful purpose in what is to come, I will rip out his entrails and eat them while he still lives."

"Do you think killing him would be that easy?" Gemnez asked.

"I have killed hundreds of glabrezu, and his babau merely surprised me when first we met. A second meeting would not end so advantageously for the pair. I promise you that." It felt good to boast, and Hedrenatherax felt the vigorous and heady rush of demonic arrogance fill him. It was a sensation he had not felt for some time.

"You still fail to understand just what Hazergal truly is," Gemnez said, shaking his head.

"Then enlighten me, toad," Hedrenatherax growled.

"You and I were once mortals, yes, you believe this?" Gemnez began.

"Of course, we all were." Hedrenatherax answered. "It is the way of the Abyss."

"True." Gemnez replied. "Now tell me, do you remember anything of your mortal life?"

"What?" Hedrenatherax seemed truly perplexed by the question. "No, none of us do. I understand that Hazergal does, but how does that make him anything more than a freak?"

"Ah, there is where you lack understanding, my lord," Gemnez said. "You must understand what mortals represent to understand the significance of Hazergal. Mortality represents endless possibilities. Nothing holds a mortal man from achieving all he desires beyond his own fears and doubts. There is no upper limit to what a mortal might achieve while he lives, even

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godhood, if he grows great enough."

"So?" Hedrenatherax asked, failing to grasp Gemnez's point.

"You still don't see," Gemnez said shaking his head. "You and I are bound by the limitations of our very natures. We cannot grasp that which is beyond the domains given to demon and devil in the shadowy prehistory of the multiverse. We must ascend to power upon the regimented path of our kind: from lemure or dretch to pit fiend or balor, and beyond, demon lord or archdevil. It is the same path trod upon by ever demon or devil that has ever existed; it is inescapable, and despite the power we may command, there are still limits."

"And you believe that Hazergal can reach beyond these 'limits'?" Hedrenatherax said. "To what purpose?"

"To whatever purpose he desires," Gemnez replied. "That is the crux of it. Not only has Hazergal retained the power of the mortal mage he was in life, which is considerable, but he has also kept his humanity, tainted as it is. And this allows him to strive well beyond the limitations of his demonic body and reach for something that is … well, beyond my understanding. And, at this point, likely beyond his as well."

"And you believe this unlimited potential will help us defeat Yaghur Hod?" Hedrenatherax suddenly laughed. "I think you place far too much faith in what is likely nothing more than a freak planar accident."

"Perhaps," Gemnez conceded. "But tell me, Hedrenatherax, can you remember an encounter between a dretch and a balor that resulted in a victory for the dretch? I mean, beyond your own?" The rogue devil's words were barbed and they found their mark easily.

Hedrenatherax was silent for a moment, and his eyes smoldered with the humiliating memory of his defeat at the spawning pits. "Very well, toad, I concede that Hazergal has power, but to stand against one such as Yaghur Hod … "

"I do not propose that Hazergal march off to Hades and challenge the great daemon to single combat. I think his evolution is far from finished, although I confess, I have no idea what the end product of his transformations shall be."

"And what of this Azadan? He appears to serve Hazergal with some loyalty."

"Yes, Azadan served Hazergal when they both were mortal. Upon his death, Azadan's soul was confined to the Abyss, and they have been

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reunited. The fact that such an inconceivable event has happened twice in such a short span, and that both of these mortals remember their past, says to me that there are forces at work here far beyond my ken." Gemnez said. "So, yes, I count Hazergal and this Azadan among our assets. Hazergal's personal power alone is considerable, and if Azadan proves to be as capable as his master, then we shall be well served indeed."

Hedrenatherax swallowed the lump of bile that had risen in his throat at the thought of conspiring with so hated an enemy, but with Yaghur Hod poised to move against him, he could not be choosy about his allies. "Very well, I will hold off killing the freak, for now," he said through clenched teeth.

"Excellent, I knew you would see reason, my lord," Gemnez said. "Perhaps I should bring them into your presence so that we can discuss our plans more fully?"

"Enough with this 'my lord' nonsense, toad," Hedrenatherax growled. "You've never served anything or anyone but yourself for as long as I have had the misfortune of knowing you."

"Very well, *Hedrenatherax*," Gemnez said with a smile. "Then we are to be equals after all."

"I wouldn't go that far, toad," Hedrenatherax scowled. "Where have my guests gone to, by the way?"

"I believe they were going to pay a visit to your armory," Gemnez replied. "Azadan wished to outfit himself with accouterments befitting a warrior of his status. I understand he's quite skilled."

Hedrenatherax reached down to rub at the spot where the babau warrior's blade had bitten his leg. It had healed, thanks to his demonic regenerative ability, but the memory of Azadan's speed and skill lingered fresh in his mind. "Very well, let us go to them there. I have need of the armory myself," he said rising from his throne. "I seem to have lost my spear."

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Azadan wandered through a bewildering array of racks, stands, and shelves, all overflowing with the most awful, and yet stunningly wrought, accouterments of war and death. Behind the gaunt babau followed Hazergal, nimbly threading the cramped space despite his recently adopted glabrezu body. At the doorway to the armory huddled a group of six dretches, mewling pathetically for their master, who had forbade them entry into the cluttered room.

The armory of Hedrax was largely scavenged from the ruins of Pyrak's citadel, although Hedrenatherax had managed to add a few choice pieces to the collection in his short reign. The swords, axes, spears, and varied and multitudinous suits of armor had been claimed and then largely forgotten by both Pyrak and Hedrenatherax, and now these great martial treasures simply gathered dust instead of lives in the dark, sepulchral armory. Nearly all of the arms and armor that rested here bore some minor enchantment, and a few of them positively thrummed with magical power.

The warrior-demon was silent as he picked his way through the armory's contents. However, Azadan's eyes were bright and eager, his warrior soul simply delighted with the prospect of plundering such a rich store. He would stop at a rack for a moment, pluck up a sword or an axe, or perhaps a shield, test its balance and weight, shake his skull-like head, and then carefully return the item to its nook and move on.

Hazergal watched his friend with no small amusement. There had been little except pain and despair for both of them since their confinement to the Abyss. Watching Azadan pick through the armory like an eager child in a toymaker's shop was a simple pleasure, and the former archmage found himself caught up in his friend's excitement, despite having little use for the tools of warfare himself.

A sense of purpose, however faint, had settled upon both mortals-turned-demon. It was more than the hammer stroke of destiny, which Hazergal had often felt guiding his actions with crude efficiency. This was something altogether different. For the first time, Hazergal felt that his own power, and perhaps that of Azadan as well, would be a deciding

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factor in the events to come. Gemnez and Hedrenatherax had all but affirmed this notion.

Gemnez had seemed truly relieved that Hazergal was unharmed, and Hedrenatherax, blustering aside, took no violent action against him, despite the setbacks the demon lord had suffered by his hand. It had been a long time since Hazergal had felt truly in control of his destiny, and even though this might be nothing more than delusion, it was a heady sensation that he could not help but savor.

Ahead, Azadan had stopped to admire an armor stand, which held a magnificent hauberk of ebony-colored scale mail, complete with greaves and a large, rectangular shield of the same lusterless black metal.

"Ah, now this is what I'm looking for," Azadan exclaimed with pleasure. He picked up the shield, and placed his left hand inside the central boss. He then slid into a fluid fighting stance, holding the shield away from his body, arm slightly crooked, at a distance of about three feet. Hazergal was no warrior, but he recognized the utility of holding the shield in such a way. It kept an enemy at a distance, and even if a blow were to bypass the shield, the distance between the shield and Azadan's body all but ensured that the strike would not inflict a crippling or lethal wound.

"Light as a feather," Azadan said, moving the shield around his body in a circular pattern. "And big enough to cover me from throat to ankle. Is it enchanted?"

A smile crossed Hazergal's face, and his demonic canine face creased awkwardly in a way it was never meant to. "Let us find out," he said, taking the shield from Azadan with his smaller set of limbs. Just as he had done in Pyrak's citadel with the sword Azadan had found, Hazergal found that he merely had to concentrate, and the shield's magical enhancements were revealed to him, unfolding in his mind with the precision of an architect's blueprints. He was silent for a moment, and then he handed the shield back to his friend.

"Well?" Azadan said expectantly.

"Oh, it's certainly enchanted, my friend, and heavily. Its negligible weight is only one of many powerful enchantments that have been wrought upon it. I would not doubt that the armor bears similar enhancements."

Azadan grinned. "Do you think that great, scaly oaf upstairs will mind if I appropriate the armor and shield for my own use?"

"Would you care if he did?" Hazergal asked, touching his tongue to his

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front teeth and returning the smile.

"Well, I can't say I wouldn't mind another go at him, if only for the grief he's caused you," Azadan said. "But I fear the fat one would be more than a little upset if I were to gut Hedrenatherax. Besides he might even be useful in this madness to come."

Hazergal nodded. "I fear you are right. Although the look on is face when he realized you were more than a simple babau is one I shall cherish always." He grinned maliciously.

Azadan shook his head. "I should not have attacked him as I did. Even though my sword cut his flesh, the cut to his pride was deeper and could well bear rotten fruit in the future."

"No, what you did was appropriate," Hazergal said, resting a huge pincered claw upon the shorter babau's shoulder. "Do you remember how we dealt with Duke Yuzan?"

Azadan's frown deepened as he attempted to delve into the memories of a life long since past. "Wasn't he the fat one? The Duke of Sedrimesh Province, correct?"

"The very one," Hazergal affirmed. "Do your remember how we brought him to heel?"

Suddenly Azadan smiled, and Hazergal could see the memory take root and bloom behind the babau's eyes. "Oh yes, I remember now. He was the great fool that thought he was some legendary warrior reborn, or some such nonsense."

"Yes, that's right," Hazergal said, letting himself get caught up in the memory as well. "He was the one Duke that swore allegiance to us after the war. I let him live because he wasn't much of a threat, and I must admit, he was often funnier, unintentionally of course, than all the jesters, bards, and acrobats I hired to entertain us at the palace."

"As I recall, you let him keep his manse, his servants, and even that ridiculous army of fanatics that venerated him as the second coming of … what was the name?" Azadan rubbed his chin, trying to conjure more of the distant memory.

"Gorgom the Great," Hazergal said, chuckling. "Yuzan and his followers believed he was the reincarnated soul of some heroic warrior no one had ever heard of. He even published a pamphlet on the subject, kept me laughing for days."

"Yes, Gorgom the Great," Azadan said, his beady demonic eyes suddenly

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filled with mirth. "And after all the mercy you showed him, he tried to lead a rebellion against you with that 'army' of his."

"Yes, and do you remember how we dealt with it?"

Azadan nodded. "I challenged the great Gorgom to single combat, which the fool readily accepted." Now Azadan was laughing. "Oh gods, do you remember his armor, it was made of solid gold and so heavy that the fat slug could barely move in it."

"But I ordered you not to kill him, because despite his little rebellion, I couldn't bear to part with the hilarity he brought to my court on a daily basis."

"Right, I let him swing at me with that ridiculous oversized axe of his until he was so exhausted he could barely stand up. After that I poked him in the ribs with my own blade, just a flesh wound really, but he bawled like a pole-axed bull."

"And the blow to his pride was so great that we never heard a peep from him again. The legend of Gorgom the Great died the moment your blade struck home." Hazergal smiled, sadly. "A shame, really. He never attempted any treason after that, but his humiliation was so great that he never left his manse again, thus depriving me of his buffoonery."

"I understand," Azadan said. "Hedrenatherax is Gorgom the Great, correct?"

"Yes, to a degree," Hazergal confirmed. "However, he is far more dangerous than Duke Yuzan ever dreamed of being. Still, his pride is the leash that binds him, and like all dogs, it only requires a sharp tug to bring them to heel."

Turning to the armor stand, Azadan began to remove the scale hauberk. "And Gemnez," he said over his shoulder. "What of him?"

Hazergal shook his head. " I wouldn't begin to guess at what motivates that creature," he conceded. "Although, I believe he means us no harm. I think, more than anyone, Gemnez understands the peril that Yaghur Hod represents, and in that vein, I believe we can trust him to serve our best interests."

Azadan slipped the hauberk over his head, letting the rigid armor slide down over his shoulders. Like most enchanted armor, the scale hauberk always seemed to fit its wearer perfectly. The hauberk hung just below Azadan's knees, covering the top of each of the black greaves as the babau affixed them to his lower legs. "Gods, this armor is light!" he exclaimed.

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"Feels like my own skin."

"And its enchantments would likely stop a ballista bolt at close range," Hazergal added. He stared at the armored form of Azadan and smiled, overcome with nostalgic joy. "It is good to see you properly attired again, my friend."

"Good to be so," Azadan returned. The armored babau regarded the racks of weapons and armor with a furrowed brow. "Should we find something for you, Hazergal?" he asked.

"Hah!" Hazergal snorted. "So I can embarrass myself like Duke Yuzan?"

Still chuckling at the joke, Azadan moved to a rack against the far wall of the armory that held weapons obviously made for beings much larger then man-sized. "As powerful as you are, especially now, there might come a time when a bit of steel is all the stands between you and certain doom. I've killed more than a few wizards and sorcerers that though their magic was proof against a split skull, only to find out otherwise." Azadan froze, realizing that his unfettered musing had pushed him into a dangerous area. "My lord, I … I didn't mean … " he stammered.

Hazergal waived Azadan's fumbling apologies away. "No, my friend, as painful as our past might be, your counsel, as always, serves me well."

Azadan hung his head. "I feel that I shall never have your trust again, so great was my folly," he said, sadly. "If I must forfeit my very existence to prove my loyalty to you, I will do so, without hesitation."

Hazergal squatted down so that he would be eye-level with the shorter babau. He stared into Azadan's eyes and spoke softly. "What fools we were to believe ourselves immortal, without understanding what true immortality entailed. The lives we lived, the betrayals we committed, all of it is long dead and buried. Believe me when I say that I have never trusted or needed you more than I do now. Here in this hellish place you are my lifeline to sanity and reason, and I shall be yours. You swore to serve me again, and your oath freely given is enough to assuage any doubt I may have held against your sincerity."

"Truly?" Azadan whispered, searching Hazergal's eyes for the lie his heart feared was there.

"Yes," Hazergal said. "Destiny as brought us together again, and what fools would we be to challenge the veracity of such an unlikely event?"

Azadan sucked in a huge breath and released it slowly. Hazergal

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felt the tension leave the smaller demon along with that breath, and he quickly changed the subject to further ease his friend's pain and doubt. "A weapon, perhaps, would not be so foolish an idea," he said. "What do you recommend for this great beast of a body I have inherited?"

The relief in Azadan's eyes was both exulting and saddening to Hazergal, but he vowed to say no more on the subject of their mortal past.

"Ah, well, something large, yet simple enough to require little skill would be the thing," Azadan said and moved to the great, towering rack of oversized weapons. "Here, this would suit you well I believe." The babau hauled a massive flanged mace, fully eight feet in length from the rack, and dragged it over to Hazergal. "You see, a mace does not require you to be mindful of an edge or striking surface, and even a clumsy blow can be devastating. In addition, it is simply enough that you could wield it in those pincers of yours with little difficulty."

Hazergal nodded, approvingly, and plucked up the mace with one pincered claw. Azadan was right, the mace was light and simple enough that he could swing it about, even with a clumsy pincer, with little difficulty. It was also large enough that he could grip it in both pincers and add the full brutal strength of his glabrezu body to a strike. The huge weapon bore minimal enchantment, but he could always improve upon that.

"Truly, one cannot help but long for a skull to smash with a weapon such as this in hand," Hazergal remarked. "Will you instruct me in its use, old friend?"

"Of course," Azadan nodded, smiling happily. "We'll have you fit to fight off an entire legion of daemons in just a few days."

The mention of daemons quickly brought Hazergal back to the peril that even now was massing against them. "I hope you're right, my friend. If what Gemnez says is true, then Yaghur Hod commands power that I can scarcely imagine. Even with an army of demons at our disposal, I fear that he is simply too great to defeat."

"You said the same of the amassed army of the Dukes of Othregard, if I remember correctly," Azadan grinned mischievously. "And yet we crushed them."

Hazergal chuckled and nodded. "No, *you* crushed them. Despite all the power I commanded, they would have overwhelmed me in the end."

"Then trust me to lead you to victory again," Azadan said. "If I could defeat the grand army of Othregard with gnolls and hobgoblins, just think

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what I can do with an army of *demons* at my disposal."

There was a fire burning in the babau's eyes, and Hazergal knew that he was not boasting. In life, Azadan Utherion had been the most gifted tactician Hazergal had ever seen, and he could not help but feel confident in his abilities. "Fair enough, but Gemnez says that Yaghur Hod will array a force against us that will shake the very bedrock of the Abyss. We will need much more than the motley horde that Hedrenatherax commands if we are to best Yaghur Hod in the field."

"With the proper numbers, I can hold off his army, but it shall be up to you to deal with Yaghur Hod himself. There, I am hopelessly outmatched," Azadan said.

Hazergal shook his head. "Regrettably, we know little about our enemy, or what personal might he commands. Gemnez seems to believe that he is like unto a god in both power and influence. I know this body commands great power, but to fight a god …"

"Even gods die," Azadan said simply. "If there is a way, you shall find it."

"And if there is not?" Hazergal asked.

Azadan laughed grimly. "Well, we've faced death before, so there are no mysteries there. Besides, what could be worse than this," he indicated his slimy, babau body with both hands.

"Hah!" Hazergal snorted. "I have been there, my friend, and I do not envy you the flesh you have been forced to wear."

"Right, so if Yaghur Hod manages to slay us both, perhaps we will end up in the celestial realm with glowing, angelic bodies as a reward for the hardships we have endured here," Azadan said, sarcastically.

Hazergal threw his head back and guffawed, the harsh, grating sound of his laughter echoing off the stone walls of the vault and sending the dretches at the doorway into paroxysms of terror. "Gods, it is good to have you back!" he exclaimed.

"I live to serve," Azadan said with a bow. "Now that we are properly armed, let us find our host and see if we cannot hammer together something that resembles a workable battle plan."

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Pazuzu, Demon Prince of the Air, sauntered through the gates of Hedrax and into the courtyard beyond with the grace and poise of conquering hero. His noble, avian face was plastered with an amiable grin, and as he moved along he used his scabbarded greatsword like the walking stick of some dandy gentleman. Behind the demon lord padded the massive, feline shapes of two leonine anzu demons, Pazuzu's most powerful servants. The anzu were there, ostensibly, to guard their master, but in truth they were more for show that anything else. Little enough could stand against the ancient demon if he was provoked to violence.

Pazuzu's taloned feet crunched audibly through the crushed white stone that carpeted the courtyard, and as he passed through the inner gates, he didn't even glance up at the looming shape of the giant fiend Uzog glaring down at him through dull, slitted eyes. Through the inner gates, in a much smaller courtyard, Pazuzu's host awaited him, and the demon lord muted his beaming smile somewhat, so as not to appear too eager.

There were four figures waiting for Pazuzu in the inner courtyard, and the demon lord had to suppress a laugh at the motley collection of fiends that confronted him. Hedrenatherax, all bulk and dull malevolence, stood next to the absurd statue in the center of the courtyard that bore his likeness. The untested demon lord's face twisted into a mask of pure hatred when he spied Pazuzu, and the knuckles of his left hand clenched around the hilt of a huge, saw-toothed falchion hanging sheathless at his waist.

Beside Hedrenatherax stood the ungainly form of Gemnez. The rogue devil's face was plastered with his best diplomatic smile, all red lips and pointed teeth. Somehow, the fat fiend had managed to squeeze his bulk into a hauberk of black chain mail, and Pazuzu fairly expected the straining metal to give way any moment.

The other two fiends in the courtyard were unfamiliar to Pazuzu. The first was a large babau armored in glistening, ebony scale bearing a rectangular shield of the same lustrous metal. A long, scabbarded sword hung at the babau's hip, and his right hand rested casually upon the hilt of the weapon. The babau stood protectively close to the final member of the odd quartet, a

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hulking glabrezu, whose canine face bore a look of quiet amusement.

Pazuzu stopped a few paces away from the small group, and bowed with a flourish and flutter of his massive wings. "Greetings, lord of Hedrax," he said with feigned regality. "I have come to offer you counsel in your time of need."

Hedrenatherax's face suddenly swelled with rage at Pazuzu's audacity. "I'll tell you what you can do, you feathered bastard!" he roared. "You can suck my — "

"Of course, lord Pazuzu," Gemnez cut in hastily, his huge reptilian eyes wide with alarm. "You are most welcome." The fat devil shot Hedrenatherax a glare that would wither stone, and strode forward to greet Pazuzu.

Pazuzu put a hand to his feathered chest in a display of mock outrage. "Such an ungracious attitude will hardly compel me to aid you, Lord Hedrenatherax," he said.

"My lord, please excuse the rudeness of your host," Gemnez droned, obsequiously. "We have been under much stress of late, as I am sure you understand." He looked back over his shoulder at the brooding form of Hedrenatherax, who was obviously none too pleased at the prospect of hosting a rival demon lord in his own abode, not to mention his displeasure with the army of nearly ten thousand demons Pazuzu had brought with him, currently camped right outside the main gate.

"Stress?" Hedrenatherax suddenly coughed. "The only thing I find 'stressing,' toad, other than the fact that, according to you our doom is imminent at the hands of Yaghur Hod, is the thousands upon thousands of demons sworn to our feathered friend here just outside my main gate. But other than that, I'm a overjoyed to welcome Lord Pazuzu into my home." Hedrenatherax's venom could have melted steel. "So, if we can dispense with the fluffy greetings and the bowing and the scraping, I am quite eager to find out what our guest intends."

The smile had finally faded from Pazuzu's beaked face, and behind him the two anzu tensed, sensing their master's displeasure and the violence that usually followed. "If I remember correctly, I was invited here, by you, Hedrenatherax."

"Yes, *you* were invited," Hedrenatherax conceded with a nod. "However, I hardly expected you to march a gods-be-damned army up to my front gate!"

"Well, if you are so offended by this paltry force I brought along as my honor guard," Pazuzu smiled, horribly, "then way didn't you attempt to

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stop it? Is it perhaps that you have little more than this miserable pot to piss in?" He gestured at the looming walls of Hedrax. "You are truly a most pathetic excuse for a demon lord Hedrenatherax. It is a wonder you have managed to survive this long."

"Oh, I have had just about enough of the high and mighty Pazuzu," Hedrenatherax said coldly and snatched the falchion from his waist. Pazuzu followed suit and his massive great sword was in his hands before anyone in the courtyard could blink.

Gemnez's mouth fell open in utter shock and surprise as Pazuzu rushed past him to meet the charging Hedrenatherax. It was Hazergal that kept the two demon lords from cutting each other to ribbons.

"*Enough*!!"

The courtyard was suddenly filled and overflowing with the shattering decibels of Hazergal's spell-powered command. The walls of Hedrax shook, and both Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax dropped their weapons, no more than a few paces from each other, stunned and reeling from the aural assault. The two anzu demons Pazuzu had brought with him were in true agony, writhing about and mewling like injured kittens, their sensitive hearing hammered by the strength of Hazergal's amplified voice.

"That's new," Azadan muttered, digging in his ear with one taloned finger in an attempt to root out the fiendish ringing that filled his head.

Hazergal shot the babau an exasperated smile, and then strode over to where Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax were retrieving their weapons and glaring with unabashed malice at one another. "Are you two fools finished?" the former archmage asked, his voice dripping with scorn.

Pazuzu's head snapped around, his eyes, filled with rage and something far older and darker, bored into Hazergal. "I know you," the demon lord said slowly, his voice icy calm.

"Yes, we've met before, Lord Pazuzu," Hazergal replied.

Suddenly, the cloud of rage and chaos passed, and Pazuzu's eyes twinkled with odd mirth, he grinned. "Hazergal!" he exclaimed, grounding the point of his greatsword and ignoring the glowering form of Hedrenatherax, still armed and eager for blood, a few paces away. "My, how you've grown."

Free from the stupor of the disaster the two demon lords had attempted to manifest seconds earlier, Gemnez waddled up to Hedrenatherax, and placed one pudgy paw upon the great, scaly fiend's sword arm. "I think that's enough fun for now, don't you?" he said, softly.

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Hedrenatherax turned to glare at the fat devil, but with an act of true Herculean effort, he swallowed the lump of rage in his throat and returned his falchion to his belt. "*Fine,*" he said through clenched teeth.

"Good," Gemnez sighed, visibly relieved.

Pazuzu continued to stare at Hazergal, smiling oddly. "You are truly an intriguing creature, Hazergal. It's been quite some time since anyone or anything could hold my attention, for more than a few moments anyway."

Hazergal shook his head. Although he was a demon himself, his soul and mind remained largely human, and the chaotic mindset of true demons still baffled him. "As uncouth as your host is, Pazuzu," Hazergal sternly refused to call any demon "lord," "his question and concern are valid."

"Gods!" Hedrenatherax snorted. "Finally, someone with a lick of sense."

Pazuzu sighed, and his feathers ruffled in exasperation. "Hedrenatherax, I have no intention of retaking this barren stretch of dust you inherited from Pyrak."

"Then why did you arrive on my doorstep with an army ten thousand strong?"

"Don't you think I understand the threat Yaghur Hod represents?" Pazuzu asked sincerely. "I'm old enough to remember when his legend was simply history."

Hedrenatherax crossed his meaty arms in front of his chest. "Go on."

"I simply responded to the summons you and Gemnez issued. I assumed you would be asking for my assistance eventually, so I simply brought along this tiny little piece of my Abyssal horde to bolster your own." The wily demon lord smiled mischievously. "See how thoughtful I am? If Yaghur Hod were to come for *Fiendbleeder*, do you honestly think this castle could hold him off? Or the ridiculous horde of dretches you call an army?"

Hedrenatherax bristled, and his right hand again snaked down to his sword. However, this time Gemnez was much quicker to act. "He has a point, Hedrenatherax," Gemnez said. "We need what aid he can offer." The rogue devil turned to Pazuzu. "And you, Lord Pazuzu, shall soon discover that *you* will need what *we* have to offer."

"I have no doubt," Pazuzu said. There was no deceit in his voice. "I have lived longer than most of my allies and rivals, and I plan to continue that trend. You will find that I am one of the few that truly understands the threat that faces us all." He looked at Hedrenatherax, his ancient, world-weary eyes finding the younger demon lord's own. "Believe me when I say

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that now is no time for conquest."

"Agreed," Hedrenatherax said curtly. "Then be welcome in my home, Lord Pazuzu."

Turned, Gemnez stared at Hedrenatherax. "Oh, very good, Hedrenatherax," he exclaimed happily. "We'll beat some diplomacy into you yet."

"Silence, toad," Hedrenatherax growled as he attempted to hide the barest hint of a smile forming at the corners of his tusked mouth.

Azadan, who had been watching the diplomatic altercation with some interest, now strode up to Hazergal. "I think I should have a look at this army Pazuzu's brought along. Although it can't be worse than what we have now."

It had taken Hazergal and Gemnez some effort to convince Hedrenatherax that Azadan was a skilled general and tactician. The demon lord had a very hard time comprehending how a babau could have attained such acumen. But finally, after much growling, cursing, and the tireless effort of Gemnez, he had relented and allowed Azadan to examine what resources were available to him. Azadan had been somewhat less than thrilled with what Hedrenatherax referred to as his "Abyssal horde." Including the babau and a handful of hezrou that manned his castle walls, Hedrenatherax commanded a paltry sum of lesser demons that, Azadan had noted, "could be bested by a one-armed goblin with a sharp stick."

Now, at the notion of Azadan inspecting Pazuzu's troops, Hazergal nodded his assent. "I think that's a wise idea, old friend," he said.

Azadan pointed to the two anzu demons that were nervously pacing around the inner gates. Their blood was up, and only the twenty-five foot Uzog and his massive hammer had kept them from rushing to aid their master in the disastrous confrontation that almost was. "How many of these big bastards can you call to arms, Pazuzu?" Azadan asked. He too used no honorific to address the ancient demon lord, a fact that was not missed by the powerful fiend.

Pazuzu's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Who is this *creature* that dares to address me in so familiar a fashion?" he hissed.

Hazergal placed one pincered claw on Azadan's shoulder. "This is Azadan. He serves me," Hazergal said coolly. "You'll forgive him if he lacks in social grace, but I assure you, he is a most useful and skilled war master."

"What? A babau?" Pazuzu said incredulously.

"Azadan and I are very similar," Hazergal said. "He too remembers

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his life as a mortal, and has retained both his skill at arms and numerous lifetimes of battlefield experience."

"Really?" Pazuzu breathed, his anger evaporating in the face of such an intriguing new discovery. "That *is* fascinating."

"Enough talk," Hedrenatherax suddenly interjected. "If everyone has now made a happy new acquaintance, then I agree with the babau. Let's have a look at this army you've brought with you."

"By all means, Lord Hedrenatherax," Pazuzu said with a bow. "I do hope we can remain allies after this troublesome business concludes."

The younger demon lord laughed. "You've never had an ally, Lord Pazuzu, at least one that lived long enough to gain anything from your patronage," Hedrenatherax said and began walking towards the outer courtyard. Gemnez, Hazergal, and Azadan followed him out.

Pazuzu lingered for a moment and stroked the leonine head of the closest anzu. "We shall see," he whispered under his breath, and his eyes suddenly grew distant and cloudy as the wheels and gears of his ancient, duplicitous brain began turning. "We shall see."

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Azadan stared out over the flat, featureless plains of Vrack, squinting his eyes against the glare of the plane's multiple suns. He was hard pressed to think of a worse place to stage an ambush. The prospect of concealing a force of nearly five thousand demons in a landscape that didn't contain a single hill, valley, or even a decent knoll, was a daunting one at best. He sighed and shook his gaunt, skeletal head in frustration, eliciting a soft mewling from the four dretches that huddled around his feet.

Azadan reached down to scratch the head of the closest dretch, and it began to slobber and writhe in delight. Despite having cast aside the persona of a mere babau for his true identity, he still maintained a connection to the tiny, pathetic demons, and he found that their slavish devotion to him was a bizarre comfort.

After much deliberation, and quite a bit of coercion on the part of Gemnez, Hedrenatherax had agreed to let Azadan take command of his Abyssal army. Azadan would use the small horde of demons to patrol the areas where Yaghur Hod might seek to gain entrance into Hedrenatherax's domain, while the larger and more powerful army brought by Pazuzu would remain close to Hedrax. The former human had no delusions about stopping any serious incursion by their foe, but he would at least be able to delay an enemy force and get warning to Hazergal and the others.

The real hope was that Yaghur Hod would be delayed, or even defeated in the domains of the other demon lords he was forced to pass through to reach the plains of Vrack. The last reliable reports Gemnez had received from his vast network of spies and informants were that the great daemon had invaded Thenebrenar, and engaged its master, Orcus. However, not further reports had followed, and all feared that even the great Orcus was no match for the fury of Yaghur Hod's daemonic army. And Orcus's realm was not far from Vrack.

Behind Azadan, a clumped mass of minor demons milled about. His attempts to organize Hedrenatherax's pathetic horde into a decent fighting force had been largely unsuccessful, although he had managed to hammer

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one elementary tactic into the minds of the thousand or so babau he now commanded.

Although fearsome enough with tooth and claw, the ebony-skinned demons would be no match for the powerful daemons they would face. To bolster his babau, Azadan had raided the armories of both Hedrenatherax and Pazuzu, and then forced any competent smith he could find to work day and night forging arms and armor for his troops. In the end, each babau was given a hauberk of acid-resistant chainmail, a large, round shield, and a twelve-foot spear. Azadan hoped to force his babau into a tight phalanx, thereby presenting a bramble of spear points to the enemy, which could possibly even the odds for his weaker fiends. However, babau, like most demons, resisted conformity, even when it would keep them alive and breathing.

Through threats, and often times, bloody enforcement of those threats, Azadan had managed to shape his babau into a reasonably cohesive unit. They still fought amongst themselves constantly, but as a whole had taken an odd sort of pride in their special training and equipment. Of course, they were untested in battle, and Azadan feared that they would dissolve into a chaotic mob at first contact with enemy.

Beyond the babau, Azadan's force was composed of thousands of dretches, normally all but useless in combat, except as cannon fodder. But Azadan had a strange affinity with the smaller demons. Somehow he was able to command them far better than more powerful demons. The weak and tiny dretches could accomplish little against powerful foes, but enough of them could overwhelm and confuse an enemy line. Azadan hoped to use his influence over his dretches to form them into a single cohesive entity, with which he could bludgeon the enemy and create opportunities for his babau to inflict severe damage.

In addition to Hedrenatherax's demons, Pazuzu had loaned Azadan the services of two hundred elite vrocks, known as Dreadwings, to add aerial support and conduct recognizance. He had recently learned that the Dreadwings had once served Pyrak, but had defected to Pazuzu's service upon their old master's death. Surprisingly, the experienced vrocks were well-disciplined, for demons anyway, and did not balk at following his orders. Currently, the Dreadwings were scouting well ahead of the army, searching for signs of the enemy.

Azadan's command of this Abyssal force was made no easier by the fact

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that he could not rely upon competent underlings to help maintain order. Unlike Infernal armies, Abyssal hordes did not have a chain of command, there was no hierarchy of various ranks and positions to keep the entire force moving as a well-oiled machine. The hordes commanded by demon lords were largely held together by the personal magnetism and power of the mighty fiend himself, and would quickly dissolve into chaos without the direct threat of destruction. Azadan now found himself in this role, and while he was certainly capable of leading in such a brutal fashion, he found himself longing for the officers and squad leaders he had relied upon as a mortal general. Unfortunately, here there was not a single demon he would trust to lead the army without him, and this lack forced him to be all things, from general to quartermaster, to his army.

His greatest asset, however, was the ability to influence the actions of minor demons, an ability he did not fully understand, and one that seemed to come along with his demonic flesh. He could feel the minds of each demon under his command, and although he could not control them directly, he could impart suggestion and influence. He surmised that it was the only explanation for the order he had imposed upon his babau and dretches, as tenuous as that order might be.

Azadan lifted his gaze to the swollen, purple-clouded sky as two dark shapes appeared. Bird-like and moving fast, they skimmed across the plains, low to the ground. The two shapes drew nearer, and Azadan saw that they were two of his Dreadwing scouts. The two vrocks hovered overhead for a moment and then fluttered to the ground with a grace and ease that illustrated their true mastery of flight. They pushed their way through the small throng of dretches surrounding Azadan, being careful not to hurt any of them — Azadan had made it lethally plain what would happen to any who harmed his pets.

"Where is the rest of your flock?" Azadan demanded as soon as the vrocks were in earshot.

"Thirty miles to the north, master," The first vrock said. "We have contacted the enemy."

"I told you not to engage," Azadan growled.

"We have not. The flock merely hovers overhead, awaiting your orders, which we have been sent back to obtain."

Azadan scratched his chin. He missed the full beard he had worn as a human. "How many daemons?" he asked.

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"Not many, master," the second vrock said. "We believe it is an expeditionary force numbering roughly five thousand." That was as many as Azadan currently commanded, and he didn't like the idea of an even battle.

"What manner of daemons comprise this force?" he asked. "And how many of each?"

"We counted nearly four thousand cryptodaemons, master," the first vrock answered. "They are weak and easy to kill, but the daemons have mustered nearly a thousand terradaemons."

"Terradaemons?" Azadan said, puzzled. Admittedly he was not well versed in planar lore, and was largely unfamiliar with the myriad forms of fiends across the lower planes.

"Yes, master, terradaemons," the second vrock said. "They are large and strong, very tough."

"So they've got light and heavy infantry," Azadan mused. "What about air support?"

"None," both vrocks said together. "We saw no azodaemons, master."

"Interesting," Azadan said. "Recommendations?"

The two vrocks blinked in surprise at the request. They weren't used to more powerful demons asking them for advice. "Truly?" the first vrock said. "You wish to know *our* minds?"

Azadan sighed, exasperatedly. "First tell me your names," he ordered.

"I am Kreeksh," the first vrock said.

"And I am Voarkka," the second vrock said on the heels of the first.

"Excellent. Now, you've seen the daemons, correct?" The two vrocks nodded. "Then tell me what you would do if you were lucky enough to be leading this rabble behind me."

Kreeksh, the larger of the two vrocks, and obviously the dominant one, began hesitantly. "As I am sure you are well aware, we Dreadwings have been trained to fight the Infernals, and so, we have been equipped to do so." The big vrock gestured to the massive bow and quiver of barbed arrows across his broad back.

"Our arrows are tipped with silver," Voarkka cut in, earning a scowl for Kreeksh. "They are perfect for slaying devils, but daemons have an altogether different resistance, one that we are not equipped to exploit."

"And what is this weakness?" Azadan asked.

Kreeksh wrinkled his avian snout in disgust. "A daemon's flesh is especially vulnerable to the taint of the upper planes."

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Azadan chuckled. "Yes, that might be a bit difficult to come by here in the Abyss. But still, their entire force is land bound, while I have two hundred or so of your brethren to call upon. That is an advantage I cannot ignore."

"But why engage them, master?" Voarkka said, and then flinched visibly when he realized that he had questioned Azadan.

Azadan smiled inwardly at the vrock's reaction, but said nothing. "A good question," he replied, drawing a gape of surprise from both vrocks. "I think it would be prudent to destroy this expeditionary force if we can. They are the first we have encountered, and I want to send a message to Yaghur Hod. In addition, I don't want whatever intelligence this force is gathering to get back to the Archodaemon."

"That is sound reasoning, master," Kreeksh said carefully, and then, emboldened by something, he stared hard at Azadan with a strange expression on his face. "You lead much the same way Grimclaw did," the big vrock said. "We saw much success and conquest under his command."

Voarkka nodded in agreement. "Yes, we would see a return to such glory, even if our leader was," he hesitated, searching for the right words, "bound to the earth." It was probably the politest way for a vrock to refer to creatures lacking the ability to fly.

Azadan had heard of Grimclaw. He had been the leader of the Dreadwings when Pyrak ruled. His death at the hands of Hedrenatherax had been played a large part in the Dreadwings' exodus, for he was respected in a way that was all but unheard of in the Abyss. Azadan was pleased at the comparison between he and the near legendary vrock, but he didn't let it show.

"What do you wish of us, master?" Kreeksh asked. "What message shall we carry back to our brethren?"

Azadan frowned, his mind working through dozens of possible scenarios. Unfortunately, all of them required either a different landscape or better troops. A sudden wind picked up and howled across the flat plains of Vrack, carrying a blinding swirl of the fine dust that coated the entire layer. Azadan wiped the grit from his eyes, and then a smile slowly crept across his skeletal face. "Kreeksh, Voarkka, come close," he commanded. "I have an idea."

* * * * *

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Azadan called a halt to the forward momentum of his army, and was more than a little pleased when his thousand or so armored babau stopped in unison with a clatter of mail and shields. The horde of dretches, however, was a different matter. They flowed amoeba-like into the ranks of babau and through them, eliciting a chorus of snarls and curses from the larger demons.

Ahead, a massive cloud of dust hung in the air, created by the wings of nearly two hundred vrocks. It enveloped the daemonic army Azadan had come to do battle with, and he sincerely hoped the screening dust would give him the advantage he needed. Above the dust cloud, a small group of Dreadwings hovered, picking off the few daemons that managed to struggle free from the choking cloud. Even though the daemons were resistant to the silvered arrows of the Dreadwings, they were still cut down by the sheer number of missiles that struck them.

Azadan grinned happily. He knew that the daemon lines had to be in utter disarray, which would work in his favor … if he could keep his own troops in line for a few crucial seconds.

"Lobgog!" Azadan shouted, calling for the de facto leader of his dretch horde. The oversized dretch came shambling forward from a group of its smaller kin, and, grinning madly at the prospect of Azadan's attention, moved to stand before its master.

"Yersh, mashter," Lobgog said, speaking the words though a mouthful of crooked fangs. At almost six feet tall, Lobgog was the pinnacle of dretchdom. Add in the fact that he could speak and employ simple logic, and he was likely the most capable dretch in the Abyss. Like all dretches the former human had encountered, he was also slavishly devoted to Azadan.

Azadan smiled at his dretch "lieutenant," and patted his flat, mangy head affectionately. "Are you ready, Lobgog?" he asked.

The overgrown dretch nodded vigorously, and began to drool with unabashed delight.

"Good, now tell me, what is it you are supposed to do?" Azadan asked.

Lobgog's mushed face crinkled suddenly as his feeble intellect struggled to grasp and hold the elusive memory of Azadan's recent instruction. A few seconds passed, and then the dretch's wide, flabby mouth turned up in an idiot's delighted smile. "Lobgog attack with brothersh?"

"That's right, Lobgog," Azadan replied. "You will lead your brothers into the dust cloud and kill all the daemons you encounter. Do you understand?"

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Again, Lobgog nodded enthusiastically.

"Then go, and bring us victory," Azadan said, pushing the dretch toward the huge horde of his brethren. The big dretch scampered away, and after a few guttural barks, plus a few well-placed kicks, managed to get the great mass of dretches moving in the right direction. Azadan watched them go with great satisfaction, loping in tattered clumps across the barren plain, howling and screaming with delight. The dretches disappeared into the dust cloud almost en masse, and the world was suddenly filled with the crashing din of combat.

Azadan turned to address what was left of his army, the legion of armored babau. They were standing in loose ranks, leaning upon their spears, and looking more than a little confused. Babau were quite intelligent, although the manner of warfare that Azadan had forced upon them went against every fiber of their being. He could tell that they would much rather be joining the dretches in a wild melee, but he had other plans.

"*Form ranks*!!" he barked, projecting his voice over the assembled demons. The babau responded slowly, but well enough to suit him. They gathered up in three lines, each containing roughly three hundred babau each. Each line was tightly packed, and the babau's shields locked together to create an iron front that bristled with spears. The two lines behind the first projected their long spears over the heads of their fellows, allowing all three ranks to engage the enemy at once. It was a beautiful sight, and Azadan felt his confidence grow just looking at what his handiwork had wrought.

"Excellent!" he called out. "I know this style of fighting is new to you," he continued, walking down the length of his front line. "But trust me, your enemy will not expect it, and there will be enough blood and slaughter to glut your appetites for weeks to come!"

The assembled babau let out a hissing cry of approval, and the ranks rippled like a curtain of steel, ready to spring forward and bring ruin to the enemy. Azadan was pleased at their eagerness, but in the back of his mind, he worried that they would not hold together long enough for the phalanx to work. Azadan drew his sword and raised it to the sky. "*Now*! *Forward*!" he howled.

In response his babau moved, in unison, their armored bodies gliding together smoothly, rhythmically, over the flat ground. Azadan readied his own shield, and took position on the left wing of the front rank, marching in time with his troops.

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Ahead the cloud of dust grew larger and the wet, metallic sounds of battle became louder. When they were within one hundred yards of the cloud, Azadan raised his sword again, and the babau phalanx ground to a halt. He could see the outer edge of the circle of vrocks hovering overhead, their mammoth wings beating furiously to kick up the dust that formed the bulk of Azadan's battle plan. Again he raised his sword, and from the rear of the babau lines, a demon brought a curled horn to his lips and blew a single sharp blast.

Azadan looked up, and as planned, the circle of vrocks retreated higher into the air, forming a densely packed cloud of airborne demons. Deprived of the furious wind created by the vrocks, the dust cloud began to settle, and Azadan could begin to discern the rough, chaotic shapes of many fiendish bodies battling within.

Azadan could felt the tension swelling along the lines of his phalanx, and he held up his sword again. "*Wait for my signal*!" he shouted over the wild din of the battle ahead.

The dust continued to clear, and finally, Azadan could make out the definite forms of his dretches and the writhing mass of daemons they were fighting. As expected, the daemonic army consisted primarily of the insectoid cryptodaemons, but there was a large contingent of bulky, humanoid fiends with pebbly gray skin, each with a single, lidless eye in the center of their blocky, misshapen head. Azadan surmised that these creatures must be the terradaemons Kreeksh and Voarkka had mentioned. In addition, Azadan spied a small number of the crocodilian cacodaemons, likely the ones leading the expeditionary force. These more powerful daemons stood well away from the melee and used their sorcerous talents to lob balls of fire and ice into groups of dretches.

The dretches seemed to be holding their own against the cryptodaemons, and as Azadan watched, he could see knots of the smaller demons pulling down their larger adversaries and ripping them to pieces. However, the terradaemons were armored in what looked like some kind of heavy chain shirt and were wielding large cold iron mallets in both meaty fists. Where there were groups of these towering fiends, the dretches had suffered badly, and their pulped corpses littered the ground in piles.

In a few moments, Azadan ascertained that nearly half the dretches were dead or dying, while the daemons had lost roughly a third of their army, with most of the casualties coming from the ranks of the weaker

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cryptodaemons. Azadan and his babau had not been spotted yet, and the former human general knew that now was the best time to strike. He dropped his sword to his side and shouted, "*Advance*! *Double step*!"

The babau phalanx surged forward at Azadan's command, moving at a slow trot. Directly ahead a large group of terradaemons were pounding the hell out of small contingent of dretches, led by the recognizable figure of Lobgog.

At twenty-five yards from the enemy, Azadan raised his sword once more and cried, "*CHARGE*!" At this point the daemons became aware of the impending danger, and attempted to form up into some kind of battle line. There simply wasn't time, and the thousand-strong babau hammered into the mass of daemons with a tremendous crash.

The spears of the front ranks, driven at nearly a dead run, pierced everything in their path. Cryptodaemons and terradaemons were skewered by sometimes half a dozen spear points, and despite their resistance to conventional arms, were killed before their rent bodies hit the ground.

Azadan slashed wildly with his sword, dismembering the smaller cryptodaemons as they attempted to bring their claws or short, stabbing swords to bear, or opening up the abdomens of the larger terradaemons to add their spilled intestines and effluvium to the churning chaos. He stayed close his phalanx, screaming orders, and slaying anything that ventured within sword range. The phalanx had ripped a ragged hole in the disorganized daemon line, killing hundreds in their initial charge. But they were still outnumbered, and as the daemons begin to fill in the gap created by the phalanx, the babau found themselves in the center of chaotic maelstrom of writhing, fiendish bodies.

"*Maintain ranks*!" Azadan screeched over the impossible clamor of battle. If the babau abandoned their close order, then they would be overwhelmed and crushed. Surprisingly, the babau did exactly what they had been trained to do, and formed up in a tight square, presenting a bristling array of spears in all directions.

The daemons hurled themselves at the babau with wild abandon, attempting to crack the fortified ranks of the black-skinned demons. They had become like their demonic enemies, attacking with out any sense of organization. They came at the babau in small groups, instead of using their numbers to overwhelm, and the spears of Azadan's troops did butcher's work, killing the enemy in droves.

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Azadan whirled and slashed at the daemons foolish enough to draw near, and soon, he found himself alone amid a pile of corpses. He took the momentary reprieve to put into action the rest of his plan, and waved his sword over his head furiously. In response, the Dreadwings, who had been to this point hovering above the battle, dove, en masse, at the largest clot of daemonic resistance. The winged demons loosed an unearthly screech as they knifed towards the enemy below, and when they struck, their talons and beaks cut through the enemy ranks with horrifying ease.

The remaining dretches, heartened by Azadan's presence, redoubled their attack, and the tiny demons, in clumps of a dozen or more, hounded their enemies from behind, while the spears of the babau butchered them from the front. The Dreadwings, now on the ground, focused their efforts on the cacodaemons commanding the daemonic army. They ripped into them with beak and talons. At times, a group of the vrocks would gather in a bizarre ritual dance, culminating in the release of a ring of terrible destructive energy that shredded daemons yet left demonic allies unharmed.

Azadan had been in many battles, and he could always sense a change in the tide of combat, for good or ill. He felt the pressure of uncertainty suddenly lift, and he was filled with the joyous anticipation of victory, an infectious sentiment that traveled through all of his troops and allies. The daemons were beaten, and as their losses grew, Azadan could feel the nervous horror of the defeated bloom within their ranks. The battle was won in a heartbeat. In one instant the daemons were battering away at their demonic enemies, and the next, they were fleeing, all thoughts of battle forgotten in the mad dash to save life and limb.

Azadan let his babau chase their foes, and watched with intense satisfaction as their spears slammed into the backs of the fleeing daemons. He allowed the slaughter to continue for a few moments. His demons had earned a taste of chaos and blood fury, but he did not let them indulge too long, lest they forget their purpose.

Two blasts from the war horn called the babau away from their carnage, and they reluctantly formed ranks amid the shattered corpses of their enemies. The Dreadwings, understanding their role very well, took to the air to watch for any daemonic reinforcements.

All in all, Azadan had lost one thousand dretches and only two hundred babau. It was a stunning victory, for the enemy had suffered casualties equaling two-thirds their total number. The rest had fled, and would likely

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be hunted down and killed by the many independent flocks of vrocks and other flying horrors that haunted the plains of Vrack.

After tallying up his losses, Azadan allowed his troops to loot or eat the bodies of the fallen daemons. Their morale was high, for nothing drove soldiers like victory, food, and well-earned loot after the battle was over. He knew it was just the beginning of a long and terrible war that was to come, but he allowed himself a small and silent celebration. He could still lead soldiers to victory, be they mortal or demon, and for that he was grateful. No matter what might happen in days and weeks to come, the skills he had earned in his lifetime as a mortal were still his to command, and for the first time since his confinement to the Abyss, he felt very *human*.

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"This is madness!" Hazergal shouted, clacking his huge pincers together to add emphasis to his rebuke. "I will not lower myself to such abominable practices!"

The object of his scorn, the fat, scaly devil Gemnez, stood at the lip of a great bubbling pool of green fluid, absently probing beneath the surface of the vile effluvium with a long steel lance. The great spawning pit of Gemnez Drak, named for its master, had been producing new demons at a furious pace, although it was not nearly enough to meet the demand.

"This is not time to grow squeamish, my dear Hazergal," Gemnez said, idly stirring the muck of the spawning pool. "The future of the Abyss may depend on your decisions, here and now." Gemnez suddenly grunted with effort, as the hooked end of his lance snared something beneath the surface of the spawning pit. His massive, flabby arms heaved, and he hauled a squirming, slime-coated mass from the pit, hooked firmly on the end of his lance. He deposited the wriggling lump near a waiting babau, who began to remove a clinging semi-translucent membrane. Once the membrane was cleared away, the flabby, spindly-limbed form of a dretch was revealed. It mewled weakly, and climbed shakily to its feet, a newly birthed demon ready to spread woe and chaos in the name of the Abyss.

"Another dretch," Hazergal remarked, disappointedly. "Gods, we have enough of the useless things to fill half this bloody plain already." He watched as Gemnez's babau servitor led the dretch away, prodding it along with a short iron goad. It had not been too long ago that he had worn the pale, sagging flesh of a dretch. He shuddered at the memory of feeling so utterly powerless and weak.

"Yes, unfortunately, the majority of larvae are made of souls too weak to become anything else," Gemnez replied, frowning. "And what's worse, the night hags refuse to sell to us now."

"Yaghur Hod has that much power over them?" Hazergal asked. He had dealt with the night hags more than once during his life as a mortal wizard. "I'd always thought that the hags were largely independent of the politics in Gehenna and Hades."

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"Independent, yes. Immune, no," Gemnez responded. "Only a fool would challenge Yaghur Hod's edict now; he's too powerful. From what my spies have told me, he controls both planes utterly, without dissention."

Hazergal looked over the smoking pit of the spawning pool, watching a dozen or so babau haul wriggling, newly born dretches from the slime. They were producing nearly one thousand of the small demons each day, but their supply of larvae — the incarnations of newly damned souls from which all lower planar life was created — was beginning to run short. If Gemnez was correct, there would be no more for the foreseeable future.

"How can we win, Gemnez?" Hazergal said, softly. "Yaghur Hod grows stronger by the minute, while we are mired here, weak and vulnerable."

Gemnez sighed, and passed his lance to a nearby babau servitor. The great devil strode up to Hazergal and looked him in the eye. "That is why you must consider my proposition, no matter how distasteful it is to you."

Hazergal's canine face contorted in a snarl. "No!" he spat. "I will not accept sacrifices like some great heathen god!"

Gemnez's plan was a simple one. Hazergal's previous transformations into new demonic bodies had all come after failures to resist his fiendish nature had compelled him to eat the flesh of slain demons. Gemnez wanted to force Hazergal's continued transformation by allowing the former mortal to consume captive demons until he reached the final stage of his metamorphosis. The fat devil believed that once Hazergal had finished evolving, he would command a power great enough to challenge even Yaghur Hod. But Hazergal would have none of it. He had been utterly amoral in his mortal life, but he had never been a cannibal. He recoiled at the very idea of such a ghoulish course of action.

"By the Nine, Hazergal!" Gemnez suddenly thundered, his scaly, painted face darkening with a rare outburst. "You are a *demon*! Questions of conduct and ethics should hardly impede your decision-making!' he spat. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but did you not slaughter thousands when you ruled Othregard?"

"Yes, of course I did," Hazergal conceded. "But that was war, conquest. Perhaps I was wicked, perhaps I deserved to be sent to the Abyss, but by the gods, Gemnez, there are limits to how low I will sink."

"And what is this?" Gemnez asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Hazergal shook his head. "It is not the same. The demons whose essence I consumed were enemies. And it was never a conscious choice to absorb

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their essence. Each time, the instincts of my demonic body overcame me, and that was how it happened."

"Again, you insist on clinging to your human values," Gemnez said. "The difference between enemies and allies here is a very fine line. You must take what you need. There is a greater purpose here, one that eclipses your mortal notions of morality."

Hazergal glared at Gemnez. He hated the razor-sharp logic the devil often employed when they argued. The rogue Infernal had little understanding of human morality, and considered it pointless in the extreme. But Hazergal could not let go of the small portion of himself that was still human. He had no desire to revisit the petty cruelties and rigid paranoia he had lived with as a mortal — it had cost him too much. But there was no denying that Gemnez might be right. He had grown in power with each subsequent transformation, as he gained further access to a seemingly limitless gulf of arcane ability with each new, demonic form.

"It might not even work," Hazergal said through clenched teeth. "As I said before, I didn't choose to trigger the transformations, they just happened. I'm not willing to forgo the last shreds of my humanity just so we can exhaust all the options at our disposal." Gemnez opened his fanged mouth to further protest, but Hazergal cut him off by raising one pincered claw. "However, I will consider it if there are truly no other options. Good enough?"

Gemnez nodded gravely. "It will have to be. I doubt, even now, I could force you to do anything, and I certainly have no desire to earn the enmity of the entity I think you will become."

"Fair enough," Hazergal said. "Let us speak of other things. Have you heard back from any of the delegations sent to the other demon princes?"

"Not yet, the fools," Gemnez said and spat with disgust. "Trying to get demon lords to work together, even in the face of their own destruction, is truly an exercise in futility. They can only see that Hedrenatherax is weak, which means they will do nothing but plot to usurp his power and realm."

"That might actually work in our favor," Hazergal said. "I certainly wouldn't complain if Dagon or one of the other powerful princes showed up on our doorstep with an Abyssal horde while Yaghur Hod is invading."

"Interesting," Gemnez said. "I hadn't considered actually tempting the demon lords with the lure of an easily conquered realm."

"What? The delegations you sent are telling the demon princes the truth?" Hazergal said, in amazement.

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Gemnez smiled weakly, and Hazergal could swear that he saw the great devil blush. "Well, yes, I though that would be the best course," he said, averting his eyes from Hazergal's own. "I think your ridiculous human values are contagious."

Hazergal threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, Gemnez, that is too much. A devil trying to woo the aid of demon princes by telling the *truth*."

Gemnez could not help but smile at that. It truly was a ridiculous concept. "Very well, have your jape, but I truly believe you are having an effect on the fiends around you."

Hazergal sobered quickly. "What do you mean?"

"Haven't you noticed the changes?" Gemnez asked. "Hedrenatherax has recently become susceptible to logic and reason, a complete transformation from the block-headed dolt he was. And I must admit, I have been entertaining notions that are … well, not becoming of a self-respecting devil."

"And you think these changes have something to do with me?"

"Certainly," Gemnez said. "You are the living embodiment of change. It is no great surprise that your mere presence causes changes in others. Your friend, Azadan, I believe exerts a similar influence, although his is far more martial in nature."

Hazergal nodded. "You may be right. Now that I think about it, many of the demons around us have shown oddly human behavior. You included."

"Ugh," Gemnez said, sticking out his long forked tongue. "As much as I loathe the idea, I cannot deny that I have been feeling a bit more charitable towards my fellow fiend." He smiled. "Although I must admit, this strange 'humanizing' effect you and Azadan display does have its uses. I don't think there is a demon lord in the entire Abyss that could get a thousand babau submit to fighting in a phalanx. I've seen devil legions that weren't as efficient."

It pleased Hazergal to think of his friend in command of an army again, and he again contorted his canine face into the semblance of a smile. "Yes, Azadan has always had a way with his troops, there is no doubt. If he can mold that motley mess Hedrenatherax calls an army into something resembling a decent fighting unit, then think what he can do with what Pazuzu has brought."

"Azadan is certainly an asset," Gemnez agreed. "But convincing Pazuzu to let him lead a sizable force of his own troops … that will take some doing."

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"I don't trust that feathered snake," Hazergal spat. "He is clearly seeking some kind of advantage here."

"Of course he is," Gemnez said. "He's the most egotistical, self-serving bastard on a whole plane of egotistical, self-serving bastards. Personally, I would find it stranger if he wasn't trying to turn this war into something that ultimately serves his interests."

Hazergal turned his gaze up to the gangrenous Abyssal sky, where two dark shapes were silently knifing towards the spawning pit. "Scouts," he said, pointing an arm at the descending vrocks.

"Let's hope they bring good news from Azadan," Gemnez said, and began to walk back to towards the courtyard of his keep, where the vrocks were obviously heading.

Hazergal followed Gemnez back towards the short, squat tower that served as the devil's personal domain. Outside the main gates, the lumbering form of Uzog, the devil's hulking and faithful servant, waited. The great bison-headed demon went everywhere that Gemnez did, and Hazergal was quite certain that the behemoth fiend was one of the contributing factors to the rogue devil's continued existence on a plane full of enemies.

The courtyard of Gemnez Drak was what many mortals would certainly envision a fiend's abode to look like. It was carpeted with the bones of hundreds, if not thousands, of demons, devils, and other unrecognizable creatures. A hideous fountain depicting a hapless mortal being devoured by some horrific, tentacled monstrosity dominated the courtyard. It sprayed a geyser of foul, sticky fluid into the air at regular intervals, which caught in a wide shallow basin at the fountain's base. It was certainly a terrible spectacle, but Hazergal knew it was only for show. Gemnez despised displays of his fiendish nature, and the fountain and osseous courtyard were simple to impress the "locals."

Two large vrocks, both armored in studded leather, were waiting for Gemnez and Hazergal when they reached the courtyard. Both vrocks bore long, recurved bows over their shoulders and long, spiked morningstars at their waists, marking them as members of the Dreadwings. They bowed as Gemnez and Hazergal entered.

"What news do you bring, my feathered friends?" Gemnez said with his characteristic diplomacy. Hazergal recognized both vrocks, they were Kreeksh and Voarkka, two of the veteran members of the Dreadwings.

"We bring news of victory, masters," Kreeksh began. "Master Azadan

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has led us to triumph against the enemy."

"Really?" Hazergal said, shocked. Azadan's primary goal was to scout the area for signs of the enemy, and possibly delay and harass them with a bit of guerilla warfare if the opportunity presented itself. He hadn't planned on giving direct battle unless it was unavoidable.

"Truly, master," Voarkka said. "His guidance allowed us to smash a sizable enemy force with only minimal losses."

Gemnez smiled, hugely, treating the vrocks to a show of teeth and red lip paint. "You two are quite the advocates for your new war leader. What will Pazuzu have to say about that?"

"We choose to follow one who brings us victory and conquest, as Grimclaw did, as Pyrak did," Kreeksh said, a touch of anger creeping into the cawing syllables of his voice. "We rot in Pazunia, with little to do but hunt dretches amid the peaks. It is a far cry from the glory we once held."

Hazergal chuckled. "That's Azadan," he said. "I haven't met a soldier yet that didn't beg to fight in army he commanded."

"Intriguing," Gemnez said. "Do all of the Dreadwings feel as you do?"

"We serve Azadan now," Voarkka said. There was pride in his voice. "Along with the two hundred of our brothers that remain with him."

"And the rest?" Hazergal asked.

"Why would they desire to serve Pazuzu?" Kreeksh said, matter-of-factly. "He has done nothing to advance our prestige in the Abyss. When Azadan crushes the interloper Yaghur Hod, all will know that the Dreadwings fought alongside him."

"Oh gods, he's turned them into zealots," Gemnez said, although his wide smile was still firmly in place. "Although if they remain zealots for *our* cause, then I have no issue with Azadan's leadership methods."

"Very well," Hazergal said. "I can't imagine that Pazuzu will be pleased with your change of allegiance, but that is hardly the worst of our present concerns. Do you have anything else to report?"

"Yes, masters," Voarkka said. "After the battle, we spotted a small force of demons making their way south toward Hedrax."

"Yes, and?" Gemnez prompted. "There are hundreds, if not thousands of independent groups all over this plane, and every one of them is led be a trumped up babau calling himself a "demon prince" no less."

"This is true, master," Kreeksh said. "But this group is different. They are led by a very powerful demon indeed."

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"Who?" Gemnez and Hazergal said together.

Voarkka smiled, his avian face overcome with a gloating malevolence. "It is Orcus, masters."

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One of the greatest demon lords in the Abyss, humbled and broken, made his way up the rocky slope leading to Gemnez's fortress, and Hedrenatherax watched with grim satisfaction. The bloated, goat-headed fiend was accompanied by what loyal forces remained to him: a balor that had been altered with the addition of undead grafts, two mariliths in similar condition, and a small troupe of succubi, each blessed with what appeared to be some kind of undead curse, from vampirism to mummification. It was a pitiful procession, though Hedrenatherax marveled that the deposed demon lord had managed to retain the services of even these wretched creatures.

Despite the urge to gloat over the fallen status of the mighty Orcus, Hedrenatherax could not help but be reminded that a similar fate likely awaited him. If Yaghur Hod could defeat Orcus, who commanded a realm and Abyssal horde that was greater than any other demon lord, then what hope did he have of staving off the dread Archodaemon's advance? But still, it filled his black heart with joy to see one of his rivals so humbled.

The only other thing that took some of the joy from Orcus's disgrace was the fact that Hedrenatherax had to share it with another demon lord. Pazuzu, his grudging ally, was also present to witness the spectacle. The avian demon lord stood, flanked by two of his anzu demons, arms crossed over his chest, smiling with smug satisfaction. Pazuzu and Orcus had been rivals long before Hedrenatherax had even crawled from the spawning pit, and the demon prince was barely able to contain his elation.

Gemnez, who was standing next to Pazuzu, glanced over at the beaming demon lord, and frowned. "I don't know what you're so bloody happy about," he said. "If Yaghur Hod has defeated Orcus, where do you think he will come next?"

"Hush, devil," Pazuzu hissed. "Don't ruin this for me. We can get to the business of defending the realm after I've had a little fun."

Gemnez rolled his eyes at the two demon lords. "May the Nine preserve me from the foolishness of demons," he said, exasperatedly. Azadan and Hazergal, who stood next to Gemnez, shook their heads, almost in unison, obviously agreeing with Gemnez's opinion of the situation.

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The entirety of Gemnez Drak, both the spawning pool and the squat castle-like tower that served as its castellan's home, occupied a flat mesa atop one of the higher mountains in the area. It was easily accessible for flying demons, or for those who wished to make the arduous ascent. A narrow winding path wound up the mountainside, treacherous and in ill repair. Orcus, for some reason, had chosen the latter route, and had climbed, slowly and painstakingly up to the summit. Gemnez suspected Orcus was simply making the climb in a meaningless display of stubbornness, forcing Hedrenatherax and Pazuzu to wait for *him.* in an attempt to cling to some of his former authority and status. Gemnez, being a devil, understood the value of saving face, but it irritated him to no end that his demonic allies always applied far too much importance to such matters, even when there were truly crucial things to do and discuss.

Orcus and his entourage had reached the top of the narrow path, and the great demon lord stared at the four demons and one devil that awaited him before the walls of Gemnez's fortress. His goatish face was crinkled in a sneer, and his right hand rested on the haft of the fearsome, skull-headed mace hanging at his expansive waist. Behind the demon lord his entourage fanned out, their stances and body language also conveying a vague threat. It was a ridiculous bluff. Orcus was not only facing two demon lords, plus Hazergal, Azadan, and Gemnez, but also a sizable force of demonic troops, garrisoned at Gemnez Drak to protect the spawning pits.

Tension reigned atop the mesa, as the three demon lords fought a silent war, the loser obviously being the one who spoke first. Gemnez watched the battle of ego and will for a moment, marveling at how such powerful creatures could act like jealous children, and then stepped forward and bowed.

"Great Orcus," Gemnez said. "I am honored by your presence, and hope that my humble abode is adequate to house one of your grand stature."

Orcus turned his malevolent, yellow-eyed glare upon Gemnez, who did not shrink from the ancient demon lord's gaze. The rogue devil had faced down dozens of demon lords and even the great Asmodeus himself, and he was not about to be frightened by a humbled wreck of an archfiend who still believed he held some authority. Orcus opened his mouth to speak, but Hedrenatherax cut him off.

"Hah!" Hedrenatherax snorted. "Grand stature? He doesn't command much more than the copious squeezings of his own bowels, so I believe even a beggar's hovel would be fitting accommodations for the *great* Orcus."

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Orcus's mouth fell open, and his eyes glazed over with absolute hatred. His hand trembled on the haft of his mace, and Gemnez could feel the air suddenly grow heavy with impending violence. "How dare you address me so, whelp!" Orcus seethed. "I was conquering worlds before you even hauled your brainless carcass from the spawning pit."

"Yes, well, your conquering days are apparently over, Orky," Pazuzu chimed in, his voice dripping with honeyed scorn. "I mean, you're one of the *conquered* now."

Hazergal and Azadan, both still new to the give and take of Abyssal politics, watched the three demon lords with great interest. However, Azadan had moved a step closer to Hazergal, reflexively preparing to ward off any attack that might threaten his friend and master.

"I am forced to agree with my ally, here," Hedrenatherax said gruffly. "And despite the fact that you were once great and powerful, and despite the fact that you have been stinking up the Abyss for thousands of years, you are here now, in my domain, begging for succor. So tell me, *Orky*," Hedrenatherax found that he liked Pazuzu's mocking familiar title, "why shouldn't I spill your miserable guts all over the top of this mesa?"

The world was suddenly filled with the naked sounds of steel, as Orcus and his entourage produced a riot of swords, axes, and other horrific implements of war. Hedrenatherax and Pazuzu quickly followed suit, along with Azadan, who moved to stand directly in front of Hazergal, shield and sword held at the ready.

"This is madness!" Gemnez howled, moving to stand between the two opposing forces. "You all stand on the brink of destruction and yet you bicker like a pack of mangy curs!"

"Lagrazog, bring me this fat devil's heart," Orcus said, calmly, ignoring Gemnez's pleas.

"Gladly. Master," the massive, gray skinned balor said and stepped in front of his master, hefting a gigantic iron mace.

"Fine," Gemnez said, his eyes smoldering with rage. "If it's a display of power you cretins want, then let me indulge you! Uzog! Kill!"

The world suddenly shook, and the rear gates of Gemnez Drak, smaller than the looming iron of the front ingress, but still an imposing thirty feet of solid steel, were flung violently open, and the mammoth, bull-headed form of Uzog came rushing out.

Orcus and his entourage stared open-mouthed at the massive demon

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as it rushed forward, a cold iron maul the size of small wagon clenched in its great, meaty fists. Gemnez stepped back and simply gestured at Lagrazog, where he stood a dozen paces way from his master, mace still poised to attack Gemnez.

In response to his master's direction, Uzog barreled in at Lagrazog, his huge maul sweeping down like the fist of doom itself. To his credit, the gray-skinned balor managed to dodge the full impact of Uzog's first strike, but the maul still struck him a glancing blow. Bone crunched, and he was hurled to the ground in a heap.

Lagrazog struggled to his feet, his left arm hanging limply at his side, and called upon his innate spell-like abilities. He pointed an outstretched finger at Uzog, who was rearing back for another strike with his maul. The magic roiled from Lagrazog's outstretched finger, a wavering line of magical energy that struck Uzog flush in the chest, staggering the demonic juggernaut for an instant.

"*Implosion* spell," Hazergal said, leaning down to speak softly into Azadan's ear. "The fool, it won't work on a creature that size."

Hazergal's assessment of the spell's effectiveness was correct, and Uzog was unharmed, although the spell had succeeded at angering the massive demon. The bull-headed behemoth stared down at his smaller opponent, his small beady eyes, normally dull and clouded with simple-minded urges, now blazed full and red. The clarity and force of Uzog's rage was a palpable presence, and it bored into his opponent like a white-hot blade.

Orcus, his entourage, and the rest of the demons in the courtyard took an involuntary step back from the imminent carnage, although Hedrenatherax was grinning with delight at the unfolding violence. Only Gemnez, pudgy hands on his hips, stood unfazed by the battle. The devil's red-painted lips were turned down in a deep frown, and his eyes fairly buzzed with irritation.

Seeing that he would receive no aid from his master, Lagrazog chose the wisest course of action — he attempted to flee. The gray-skinned balor's body flames flared to life and he leapt into the air with a flutter of his mighty wings. However, the unfortunate balor had not achieved much altitude before Uzog, perhaps anticipating his opponent, stepped forward with uncanny speed and whipped his maul through the air in a devastating roundhouse blow. The heavy, cold iron head of Uzog's weapon struck Lagrazog squarely roughly twenty feet from the ground. The walls

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of Gemnez Drak echoed with a brutal, metallic thud, overlaid with the sickening crunch of shattered bone, as Lagrazog was flung, as if hurled from a catapult, off the mesa.

All the fiends present watched as Lagrazog's broken body sailed out of view, trailing a line of fire like a descending comet, and fell to the plains far below. Uzog stood at the edge of the mesa and watched his opponent disappear. The rage on the demon's face had been replaced with a look of extreme disappointment.

Gemnez moved up to his gigantic servant, and patted the huge demon's leg affectionately. "I'm sorry, Uzog," he said, softly, "You can eat the next one, I promise."

Uzog looked down at his master, and snorted, obviously upset that he had been denied a rare and tasty treat. But with one final hungry look at the rest of Orcus's entourage, he lumbered back towards the keep and stood before the gates, idly licking the blood and scales from his maul.

Gemnez turned to look at Orcus, his face an impassive mask. "Now, lest you forget who rules here in Gemnez Drak, Uzog will remain to remind you," the fat devil then turned to stare at Hedrenatherax and Pazuzu. "And you, my lords."

Hedrenatherax and Pazuzu bristled at the threat, but the looming bulk of Uzog silenced any outburst.

"Now, if we can all put our weapons away, and confront an issue that has nothing to do with an Abyssal pissing contest," Gemnez glared at the three demon lords present, "and everything to do with our continued existence, I would greatly appreciate it."

"Do you think that great oaf could really stop me, devil?" Orcus said, caustically, but returned his mace to his girdle.

Gemnez smiled at the goat-headed fiend. 'Why of course not, great Orcus," he cooed. "But he might dent that thick skull of yours enough to allow some sense to creep in … or just weaken you enough that Hedrenatherax and Pazuzu could carve you up like so much roast dretch."

Orcus stared into Gemnez's eyes, searching for the bluff. He soon saw that there was none, and he breathed out a great stinking breath, a deep sigh that carried with it an immeasurable load of pain and disappointment. "Very well, what do you want of me?" he said.

"Good, you are going to be reasonable," Gemnez said, clapping his hands together with foppish excitement. "And how about you, my lords?"

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he called over his shoulder at Hedrenatherax and Pazuzu.

Hedrenatherax sheathed his falchion, and Pazuzu returned his greatsword to its scabbard across his back. "Fine, toad," Hedrenatherax rumbled, obviously disappointed that there would not be further bloodshed. "But I do not see who this great pile of … ," he stopped and smiled. "How the great Orcus can help us."

"I too do not see how he can be of any use," Pazuzu added. "True, he commands much personal power, but he is but one demon, and in light of the foe that we must fight, what power he has will avail us little."

"Oh, for the gods' mercy!" Azadan suddenly exclaimed, and slammed his sword back into its sheath with a snap. "How do you demon lords claim the title without so much as a lick of tactical sense?"

Pazuzu looked over at Hazergal, his eyes narrowing angrily. "Your dog there has many uses, Hazergal," he said acidly. "But if he dares to speak to me in such a way again, I'll rip out his liver and feed it to him."

Hedrenatherax, who had tasted Azadan's steel and skill in the past, said nothing, although it was quite obvious that he was none too pleased at being called to task by the smaller demon.

"You are welcome to try, Lord Pazuzu," Hazergal said, evenly. "If you care to cross blades with Azadan, I'll see that your remains are properly disposed of."

Pazuzu rolled his eyes and yawned, but his blade stayed in its scabbard. "Fine, Azadan," he said. "Please enlighten us about our military shortcomings."

Azadan ignored the threats and sarcasm and continued. "He is useful to us because he has seen the enemy in battle. Not just a scouting force like I defeated, but the whole damn army. I am sure he could tell us much about how they operate, and if there are any potential weaknesses we might exploit."

Gemnez nodded and smiled. "Oh, thank the gods for the wisdom of mortals," he said, happily. "Azadan, you have the right of it. Orcus, the information you supply us, plus any additional aid you would be willing to offer, would go a long way in keeping you among the breathing, not to mention regaining your realm."

"Harrumph!" Orcus growled. "I have little faith that my realm would be returned to me, even if, through some great divine miracle, we manage to defeat Yaghur Hod. These two here," he pointed at Pazuzu and

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Hedrenatherax, "would fight like rabid wolves to gain Thenebrenar for their own."

"That is true," Gemnez conceded. "But if we drive the daemons from the Abyss, there will be heavy losses, and any demon lord will be hard pressed to maintain enough demons to hold his own demesne, let alone conquering another."

Orcus could not argue with Gemnez's reasoning. "Perhaps you are right, but what promises do I have that you will not attempt to destroy me once I have told you what I know?"

It was a fair question, and Gemnez did not have a ready answer.

"You have my promise," Azadan said, stepping forward to stand beside Gemnez.

Orcus stared at Azadan, scrutinizing the smaller demon with an eye that had seen millions of similar fiends rise and fall over the millennia. "I saw your battle against the daemons," he said. "I've never seen demons fight that way before."

"Oh, Azadan here has a singular way with his troops," Gemnez said. "It is a most unbecoming way for a demon to lead, I must say." The fat devil smiled, sincerely this time, clearly teasing the babau next to him whose military expertise he had come to rely upon.

Hazergal too moved to stand next to Gemnez, his canine face a mask of stoic sincerity. "You have my promise as well," he said. "We would value your wisdom and aid, if you would give it."

Gemnez could feel the strange influence of the two mortal's-turned-demon standing beside him. Their odd, alien emotions played over his own in a steady current of imperceptible energy, pushing away the desires and urges of his fiendish mind and replacing them with something new and vaguely appealing. He found that he actually *wanted* to honor the promise given to Orcus, rather than turn on the weakened demon lord as soon there was advantage to be gained from it. He marveled at the *strangeness* of it, and wondered if it was a transient state, or perhaps a true catalyst for a monumental change in his very nature.

Orcus too was obviously experiencing the influence of the two former mortals, and his expression of outright suspicion and anger softened. "Very well, I will tell you what I know," he said. "Although, I am forced to agree with my *peers*, "he shot a withering glance in the direction of Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax, "in that I do not know if it will help your … our cause."

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"Then let us endeavor to find out," Gemnez said. "Now if you will accept the hospitality of my house, we can discuss all of the important matters at hand." Gemnez moved aside and held an arm out, motioning Orcus to precede him to the gates.

Orcus hesitated for an instant, but then summoned up what pride and courage remained to him and moved toward the gate and the looming bulk of Uzog, who stood near it, eyeing the approaching demonic entourage with open hunger. Orcus passed through the gates, followed by Gemnez, then Hazergal and Azadan, while Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax brought up the rear. Both demon lords were silent as they entered Gemnez's domain, and Hazergal glanced back over his shoulder at the two mighty fiends, wondering if three demon lords could peacefully coexist in the same realm. Probably not, he thought, and sighed. There was a storm on the horizon, and it would devour them all if they could not quell the maelstrom brewing in their midst.

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Yaghur Hod stood, hands clasped behind his back, admiring a gigantic mural that stretched wall-to-wall and floor to ceiling around the entirety of a massive, domed chamber. It depicted Orcus, the former master of the odd, chapel-like edifice Yaghur Hod now claimed, perpetrating all manner of horrific and often lewd acts upon what seemed to be nearly every major sentient race. Elven maidens were debauched by the score, slim human youths were violated in droves, and even bearded dwarven matrons suffered the horrific attentions of the grotesque, bloated demon lord. The detail was exacting, and the delicately carved faces of Orcus's victims were depicted with such anguish that even an elder daemon such as Yaghur Hod could not help feeling a bit sickened by the representations. The mural continued on further walls. This time, however, the victims of Orcus's lust were shown giving birth to horrendous, half-dead abominations. The bodies of these unfortunate victims, both men and women alike, were depicted bursting open to allow Orcus's issue to claw their way into the world. The final scenes in the mural showed Orcus's progeny joining him in the Abyss, where he led them to victory after victory against his Abyssal rivals.

The great daemon lord had been studying the mural for hours, simultaneously thrilled by its magnificent craftsmanship and disgusted by the self-edifying, masturbatory nature of the thing. It baffled him that a creature as powerful and long-lived as Orcus could find stimulation in something so carnal, so useless, so *mortal* as the mural that decorated the chamber at the top of his massive castle complex. To Yaghur Hod, the horrid mural was another reminder of just how much he differed from the fiends that served him and those that were his enemies. It was a simple thing really, but it made all the difference between him and a demon lord such as Orcus. Yaghur Hod he had never been mortal.

Orcus, Hedrenatherax, Gemnez, and all the myriad devils, daemons, and demons in the lower planes had begun their existence as mortals. Despite the fact that they had no memory of their former lives, their origins tainted them for all eternity. The mural was proof positive that Orcus was still a hostage of the wickedness he had indulged in as a human. Rape,

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murder, violation of the flesh, these things were petty evils that one such as Yaghur Hod found tedious and unfulfilling. The darkness that resided in *his* soul hungered for much more.

It had been a week since Orcus had been defeated and driven from his realm of Thenebrenar. Yaghur Hod had allowed the demon lord to live, seeing very little gain in slaying the now impotent Abyssal ruler. In truth, he hoped that Orcus would flee to Vrack and seek succor from Hedrenatherax and the traitorous devil Gemnez. Perhaps the deposed demon lord's tales of his crushing defeat would splinter any allies Hedrenatherax had managed to gather to his side, making the taking of his realm that much easier.

Since Orcus's defeat, Yaghur Hod had taken the city of Ithrax, the capital of Thenebrenar and the place where Orcus had held his court. The massive army of daemons had scoured the city of all demonic life and now controlled the sprawling metropolis in its entirety. The remaining bands of demons, those not destroyed by Yaghur Hod's vast army, had retreated into the barren wilderness of Thenebrenar, fractured, leaderless, and truly no longer a threat. Yaghur Hod and his most trusted servants had taken up temporary residence in Orcus's citadel in the heart of Ithrax, a great, fortified palace that was certainly as opulent as any demon lord's abode, but also served as a temple and tribute to its former master's dreams of godhood.

Yaghur Hod fingered the huge, red gem hanging from the silver chain around his neck. The *Archonatrix* relayed the soft yet incessant desires of every daemon in the multiverse, filling his head with a quiet cacophony of thousands of individual minds. It was a languid whisper in the back of his consciousness, a constant reminder of what he was and what he was meant to do. Suddenly, the pressure grew stronger, as four of the souls he commanded drew near.

The Archodaemon turned around to face the winding staircase that terminated in the mural room. His gray robes fluttered softly as he bent to retrieve *Blightrazor*, the huge black-bladed scythe, from where he had laid it before turning his attention to the mural. The sounds of voices, speaking in Gahash, the primal tongue of daemon-kind, drifted up from the stairwell. The voices grew louder, and soon, four daemons emerged into the room.

The four fiends could not have been more different in appearance, although they all shared a regality, an air of authority and menace that linked them together. Each of the daemons represented one of the major races of daemon-kind: the bat-like azodaemon, the insectoid cryptodaemon,

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the bulky, stone-fleshed terradaemon, and the reptilian nightmare of a cacodaemon. These four were the most potent and experienced of their kind, having survived millennia of fierce and deadly competition amongst their brethren to attain their present power. Yaghur Hod relied on them as liaisons to their respective races, realizing that, even with the aid of the *Archonatrix*, he must still play the politician at times among his own kind.

Yaghur Hod's form blurred and changed from the short, wrinkled body of an ancient human man to that of a tall, ebony-skinned fiend — his true form. He stared at his four captains for a moment, letting them squirm beneath the glowing radiance of his gaze. When he finally spoke, his words issued from the air itself, filling the domed chamber with the soft, yet commanding, tenor of voice.

"Well, my friends," Yaghur Hod said. "What do you think of Orcus's taste in art?" There was humor in his voice, even though his featureless face betrayed nothing but stony silence.

"A bit gauche for my tastes," rumbled the terradaemon, a massive, solid creature called Nyxus. His single eye roved over the length of the mural. "Why would a demon wish to couple with," he shuddered involuntarily, "*mortals?*"

"What about you, Zeeosh?" Yaghur Hod asked, pointing one long finger at the leather-skinned azodaemon standing next to Nyxus.

"It makes me hungry, master," the azodaemon hissed, it's long, sword-like tongue darting out over its arsenal of serrated teeth. "The workmanship is finely wrought, however."

Yaghur Hod chuckled, his soft laughter echoing through the chamber. "I admire your honesty, Zeeosh. What about you two?" The Archodaemon pointed to the remaining two daemons.

"I don't understand, master," Xixel, the cryptodaemon droned, his voice a monotone buzzing. "I see nothing on the walls but grooves and gashes carved into the stone. Do they represent something?"

"What?" the final daemon, a cacodaemon called Turgon, said. "Have you no eyes, skulker? The wall is full of images, scenes of the fool Orcus's imaginary lusts and conquests. How can you not see that?"

"What do *you* see, Turgon?" Yaghur Hod prodded.

The cacodaemon turned to stare at its master, its small reptilian eyes narrowing. "Is this a test, master?" Turgon whispered. "I do not understand what is required of me."

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"There is no correct answer, Turgon," Yaghur Hod said. "But yes, I meant to measure your responses to the mural, in a fashion, it is a test."

"Have we failed then, master?" Zeeosh hissed.

No, of course not," Yaghur Hod said shaking his head. "As I said, there is no "correct" answer; however your responses correspond to your natures, and the natures of your respective races."

"How so?" said Nyxus, daring to question his master.

"You, for example, are a purist, stoic and conservative. You see the mural's subject matter in the literal, the mingling of human and demon blood. You are unable to see past your prejudices and into the mind and soul of the creator."

"Then I have failed to please you, master," Nyxus rumbled. Beside him, Turgon grinned, enjoying his rival's squirming.

"No, you still miss the point, Nyxus," Yaghur Hod said. "Your reaction to the mural merely confirms what I already knew about you. It highlights the strengths and weaknesses of your character. You were the first one to answer me because you are bold, but your response was reactionary rather than thoughtful. You must learn to see beyond your preconceived notions if you and your people are to serve me better. Do you understand?"

"Yes, master," Nyxus said, although his stony brow was furrowed in confusion.

"Master, this stone-head here is obviously blind to your enlightenment," Turgon, the cacodaemon, said. "I find that the mural depicts a strong sense of purpose, even though it is so obviously misguided. We can learn much from Orcus's folly."

"Stone-head?" Nyxus growled. "I should smash you into paste, you silk-swathed idiot."

"Feel free to try," responded Turgon. The cacodaemon's eyes flashed with crimson and his fists were suddenly sheathed in crackling, green fire.

"Enough," Yaghur Hod said, softly. "I did not bring you here to quarrel amongst yourselves."

The flames around Turgon's curled fists guttered and died. "My apologies, master," he said, obsequiously. "You must understand that it pains me to see your vision wasted on the unworthy."

"The unworthy?" Yaghur Hod said. "I will judge who is worthy, Turgon, not you. You would do well to remember that."

"Yes, master," the cacodaemon said, glaring at Nyxus, who was grinning

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from ear to ear at his rival's rebuke.

"Now, your reaction to the mural reveals much of your character as well, Turgon," Yaghur Hod said. "You hesitated to offer an opinion because you wanted to gauge my reaction first. Your response was made with the diplomat's tongue, calculated, empty and without substance. You are a flatterer and schemer, and these traits can serve me well. But you must understand that there are times when I shall require your honesty, regardless of whether you think I will approve of what you must tell me. Focus on that, Turgon. Do you understand?"

Turgon suddenly found a spot upon his black silk robes, and was rubbing at the invisible stain. He would not meet his master's eyes, but he nodded, and mumbled, "Yes, master, I understand."

"Good," Yaghur Hod said. "And you, Zeeosh, you saw only the flesh and viewed the mural with the raw instincts of the beast."

"Yes, master," the azodaemon said. "It made me hungry. I've never eaten the soft things on the wall, but they look delicious." There was not a trace of shame or duplicity in the azodaemon's voice, just the raw edge of desire.

"Spoken like the honest savage," Yaghur Hod said. "I have needed your brutality and instincts on many occasions, but to better serve me, you must temper you urges. I prefer to let my beasts off the chain, so to speak. Do not make me chain *you*, Zeeosh."

Like Nyxus, Zeeosh was having trouble understanding the point of the exercise, and the war between his master's desires and the instincts of his daemonic soul was obviously troubling the bat-like azodaemon. "I will try to make sense of your words, master," he said. "I will try."

"Excellent. And finally, you, Xixel," Yaghur Hod inclined his head toward the insectoid cryptodaemon. Xixel's face was unreadable, a chitinous mask of alien indifference. "You view the world though the eyes of the ultimate pragmatist, unable to understand that which does not immediately serve some useful purpose. I have need of pragmatism, but I also need imagination, creativity, and spontaneity. You must develop your individuality if you are to serve me at your full capacity."

Xixel's unreadable feature did not change at his master's assessment of his character. He simply focused his massive, multifaceted eyes upon Yaghur Hod, and then clacked his mandibles together audibly, the cryptodaemon equivalent of a nod. "I will think on what you have said, master."

Yaghur Hod knew he had confused the four daemons standing before

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him. They were all struggling to see beyond their basic natures, that which was ingrained in the very essence of their daemonic bodies. But those that served him would have to understand and embrace change. He meant to change the very fundamental nature of the lower planes, and those that could not adapt he simply had no use for. If Nyxus, Zeeosh, Xixel, and Turgon could not overcome their inherent flaws, then he would simply destroy them and elevate other daemons into their positions. It troubled him that he would be forced to make such decisions; he hated wasting resources. It was times like this that he missed his slain companion, the night hag Dyzaja, fiercely. She understood the scope of his vision, embraced it, and could act upon it without his intervention. Her loss in battle with Hedrenatherax had been a staggering blow, one he would revisit upon her slayer a thousand fold.

"Now, enough of this philosophical musing," Yaghur Hod said. "Let us focus on more pressing matters. Xixel, how have your scouts fared in Vrack and the realm of Shuvon Dreth?"

The insectoid daemon's head snapped up and he stepped forward to deliver his report. "Things are progressing well in the realm of Shuvon Dreth, and we have found a null zone that will allow the army to invade." Despite the size and power of Yaghur Hod's daemonic army, the distances between Abyssal realms were vast, and the majority of his troops, the cryptodaemons and terradaemons, lacked the ability to teleport. This made moving an army very difficult, and only by opening a direct portal could Yaghur Hod move his army into an enemy's realm. Unfortunately, each demon lord had complete control of his borders, and could sense and block any attempt to open a gate into his domain. Only by finding rare "null zones," areas on an Abyssal layer where even the ruling demon lord could not see, could one hope to assemble an army. They had managed to sneak a few smaller scouting sorties into nearby realms, although the sole purpose of these expeditionary forces was to locate null zones, so that the entire army could be moved.

"That is good," Yaghur Hod said. "Once we have taken Shuvon Dreth's realm, then we can move on Vrack. How have you fared in Hedrenatherax's domain?"

"In truth, master, not well," Xixel droned. "We have lost two sizable scouting sorties, and have learned virtually nothing about the plane itself."

"Really? Zeeosh, is this true?" Yaghur Hod turned his eerie green eyes upon the winged azodaemon. "I was under the impression that Hedrenatherax had few aerial resources."

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"That is what we believed, master," Zeeosh hissed, shaking his grotesque, bat-like head. "Hedrenatherax has apparently made an ally of Pazuzu, and he has provided a large force of highly trained vrocks."

"Interesting," Yaghur Hod said, idly rubbing one long-fingered hand over the place where his mouth should be. "That must be Gemnez's doing. That oaf of a demon lord could never convince one as wily as Pazuzu on his own. What of our ground troops; how were they defeated?"

"Our enemies have a capable battle leader, master," Xixel said. "His demons fight for him in a way I have never seen before."

"Oh, how so?" There was a hint of irritation now in Yaghur Hod's soft inflections. "I was under the impression that you had much experience fighting demons. You were employed by Moloch in that ridiculous war between the Hells and the Abyss, correct?"

"Yes, master," Xixel conceded. "And I saw much fighting in the Abyss, but never, have I seen demons act with such coordination. They fought together with great skill in tight formation. We were caught unaware by such a tactic, expecting only a wild melee."

"You were caught unaware *twice*?"

Xixel's alien features lacked the capacity to show fear or stress, but the room was suddenly filled with a palpable tension. "Yes, master. The second time this battle leader, a babau called Azadan, engaged our terradaemons from a distance with skirmishers, and then their infantry attacked under the cover of a dust cloud."

"This is unacceptable, Xixel," Yaghur Hod said. The Archodaemon's eyes were glowing fiercely now, bathing the room in an angry green luminance. "If I understand correctly, Hedrenatherax has only dretches and other minor demons to call upon. How in the world could such rabble defeat us?"

"I have no excuses to offer, master," Xixel said. "But I think we are now better prepared to deal with their new tactics."

"I should hope so. I want no further delays in finding a null zone on Vrack. Do you understand, Xixel?" The threat in Yaghur Hod's voice was unmistakable. "Zeeosh, you will provide him with your finest azodaemons."

"Yes, master, it shall be done." Sensing that Yaghur Hod was done with him, the cryptodaemon scuttled back behind the concealing bulk of Nyxus. Zeeosh followed, and the two began speaking in hushed tones.

Yaghur Hod ignored Zeeosh and Xixel, and turned his attention upon the two larger daemons in the room. "I hope you two have better news for

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me," he said. "Turgon, how much of my army remains in Gehenna?"

"My cacodaemons and I have established a permanent portal in the city, and your servants pour through it even now," the great crocodile-headed fiend said. "We should have be at full strength soon, master."

"That is good news," Yaghur Hod said, some of the irritation leaking from his voice. "Nyxus, what are our current numbers?"

"Just over two hundred thousand, master," the big terradaemon replied. "If Turgon is correct, we will double that in short order."

"Excellent. Little is known about Shuvon Dreth and his realm, and I have no intention of invading it until I can command the entirety of my strength."

"Master, I have managed to glean some information about this Shuvon Dreth from the few demons we have captured in the wilds," Turgon said.

"Then, by all means, tell me what you have learned," Yaghur Hod commanded.

"Of course, master," Turgon aid with a bow. "Shuvon Dreth is known as the Prince of Shadows, and his realm is said to be one of perpetual darkness. It was very fortuitous that our scouts found a null zone so close to the border between his realm and Orcus', or I fear that we would have lost more than just those destroyed in Vrack." Turgon cast a glance back over his shoulder at Xixel before continuing. "Orcus maintained a pact of non-aggression with this demon lord, and there appears to be quite a bit of mystery and even fear surrounding his name."

"Orcus was very eager to conquer new territory, and the only reason he would agree to peace with this Prince of Shadows is that open conflict would carry to great a cost." Yaghur Hod said.

"I surmised the same, master," Turgon said. "It is also quite likely that Shuvon Dreth is aware of our presence in Thenebrenar. We will not catch him unaware as we did Orcus."

"I suspect you are correct," Yaghur Hod said. "More the reason that we should wait until we are at full strength to challenge him."

"Agreed," Turgon said, nodding.

"Very well," Yaghur Hod said. "I have all I need for the moment. You may all take your leave and attend to your duties."

With great relief, the four daemons hurried out of the domed chamber. Yaghur Hod watched them go, and then turned back to Orcus's mural and resumed his quiet meditation on its horrid depictions.

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Hazergal stared out over the crenellations and merlons that adorned the top of Hedrax's tallest tower. The infinite Plains of Vrack stretched off into the horizon, a dusty brown eternity, broken only by the riotous colors of the purple and green sky above. Flights of vrocks whirled overhead, drilling in aerial maneuvers for the eventual battle with Yaghur Hod's droves of azodaemons. Meanwhile, on the ground, in front of the castle, a seething multitude of demons marched in tight formations, responding to the booming parade voice of Azadan.

As Hazergal watched the demons on the ground moving in complicated battle formations, he couldn't help but be reminded of what Gemnez had said about the influence he and Azadan where having on the demons around them. The fat devil believed that he and Azadan's remaining humanity, however tainted with the wickedness they had indulged in life, was transforming the minds and souls of the demons under their command. It was a hard theory to deny. Even Pyrak, as progressive as he had apparently been, had never accomplished the feats that Azadan was performing on a daily basis. The former human general had his demons behaving in a decidedly mortal fashion, and the loyalty and respect they displayed for their commander was simply awe-inspiring. Hazergal himself had a similar effect on the fiends closest to him, although his influence was more localized in Gemnez and the demon lords Hedrenatherax and Pazuzu.

For Hazergal, it was difficult to put all the implications of what was happening together in his mind. There was simply too much to absorb. Since his death, the former archmage had seen and experienced things that were simply inconceivable to a mortal mind, even one as powerful and driven as his own. Gemnez believed there was grand design behind the whole affair, but that could have simply been his devilish leanings toward law and organization. Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax viewed him as either a tool or an enemy, although even their chaotic dispositions had become muted, even tempered with an introspection that was unheard of among demons, and especially among demon lords.

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"What do you think our chances are, mortal?" a rasping voice said behind Hazergal. He turned to look and saw that Pazuzu was perched upon one of the tower's merlons, hunched over like a great, feathery gargoyle. The demon lord had approached within ten feet of Hazergal in utter silence. He could have been sitting there for hours.

"I don't know, Lord Pazuzu," Hazergal replied, turning back to look out over the demonic army below, an army that was composed largely of Pazuzu's own demons, although it was woefully short of greater fiends. Such demons, even Pazuzu's loyal anzu, wanted nothing to do with a war they were almost certainly destined to lose. "It is impossible to accurately gauge Yaghur Hod's true strength, but if half of what Orcus says is true …" He trailed off ominously.

Pazuzu leapt down from his perch and strode over to stand next to Hazergal. The demon lord was pitifully small next to Hazergal's looming glabrezu body, but only a fool would judge him based on size alone. The avian demon lord looked down at a group of babau skirmishers, who were closest to the wall, as they flung iron-tipped javelins at targets ranging from man-sized to ones that rivaled Uzog in size. The impacts of the javelins were a continuous muffled thump as the missiles struck home and then were gathered for further practice.

Pazuzu shrugged his feather shoulders. "Your friend there has my demons fighting in the most bizarre fashion," he said. "But so far it has worked."

Hazergal nodded. "Azadan knows his business, make no mistake. But he surprised the daemons. It won't be so easy to do that again, especially when Yaghur Hod is leading them."

"True," Pazuzu conceded. "But look there," the demon lord pointed one taloned finger at huge group of babau, each armored in an acid-resistant breastplate and bearing a large round shield and a long spear. "Look how they move. There must be five thousand there, and they act as a single organism." Pazuzu shuddered. "They look like devils, if you ask me."

"We should be so lucky," Hazergal said, sarcastically.

"Oh ho!" Pazuzu exclaimed. "You've been listening to Gemnez too much. He is all in a dither about Azadan's influence over my demons. The fat turd can't stop taking about the majesty of the Infernal legions, with their peerless organization and tactics. Bah! If the devils were so bloody organized, then they would have marched in here eons ago and ended the war."

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"No, you needed a daemon for that," Hazergal quipped. "Yaghur Hod could care less about chaos and order; his desires are far more simple."

Pazuzu nodded, gravely. "Yes, he wants to rule. Nothing else."

"So, Lord Pazuzu, did you come up here to discuss the impending war, or is there something else on your mind?" Hazergal said, turning to stare down at the smaller demon lord.

"Perhaps I just wanted to learn a bit more about our *savior*," Pazuzu said with a roguish smile.

"Now *you* have been listening to Gemnez too much," Hazergal said, shaking his head. "To hear him tell it, I'm going to march up to Yaghur Hod and choke the life from him with my bare hands."

Pazuzu cocked his head, and stared up at Gemnez, his black eyes glittering with fell curiosity. "Maybe nothing so grandiose, but you *are* a puzzle, Hazergal. That spell you unleashed in the courtyard was not something even *I* could duplicate."

"It was just a spell. I'm sure you have encountered it before."

"Yes, I have. But a *shout* spell that affects half a dozen powerful fiends, plus two demon lords, is certainly out of the ordinary."

"What do you want, Pazuzu?" Hazergal suddenly asked, pointedly. "Are you seeking an ally, or attempting to gauge the strength of a potential enemy?"

Pazuzu's smile widened, revealing the points of his shark-like teeth. "You misunderstand me," he said, softly. "I merely want to learn more about you. Gemnez is a great, fat fool, but with you, he may have the right of it."

"What? That I am becoming some all-powerful entity that will decimate our enemies?" Hazergal sneered. "You certainly don't want that, Pazuzu. If I could defeat Yaghur Hod, where does that leave demon lords like you and Hedrenatherax if I decide to pick up where the Archodaemon left off."

Pazuzu's smile disappeared, and he nodded. "I have, of course, considered that," he conceded. "But I don't think that is what you shall do, should we manage to survive Yaghur Hod. I think you left your ambition back with your mortal life on the Prime Material Plane."

Hazergal turned away from Pazuzu, frowning. His pincered claws dug furrows into the stone merlon nearest him as he clung to it, attempting to reign in the rage and despair that had suddenly boiled up from the deepest part of his soul. Pazuzu's assertion was not far off, and he felt angry and humiliated under the scrutiny of the demon lord's probing eye. It was true

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that he had toyed with the idea of resuming the tyrannical rule he had begun as a mortal in the Abyss, but he soon found that these ideas were simply the ghosts of a past life, one where the accumulation of power was the only thing that mattered. Now, he found that he had lost all taste for sovereignty. In fact, the very idea of ruling in the Abyss was repellent in the extreme.

"I thought as much," Pazuzu said. "Hazergal, I don't know what you are or what you will become, but I would much rather have you as an ally than an enemy."

"Why?" Hazergal snapped, whirling to face Pazuzu again. "Do you fear me, *my lord*?"

Pazuzu stared up at Hazergal, his face an unreadable mask. "I am not well acquainted with the truth, nor have I ever found much use for it, but yes, I fear that you may become stronger than all of us, I fear that you are stronger now, and I fear most of all being on the wrong side of the power you will likely inherit."

Hazergal was taken aback at Pazuzu's words. A demon lord admitting any weakness, especially one so base as fear, was not a common occurrence. Although, he could not help but wonder if Pazuzu's sudden honesty was simply a ploy to curry favor and nothing else. "There it is again," Hazergal said, exasperatedly. "The 'power' I will inherit. I am certainly not squeamish. I lived no life of virtue as a mortal. But you and Gemnez seem to think my transformation is something easily effected."

"Well, isn't it?" Pazuzu asked. "Gemnez said that you merely absorbed the essence of a powerful demon to fuel the change to your present form. Is this true?"

"Yes, it's true," Hazergal said. "But it was involuntary. I don't think piling up the corpses of a dozen demons will affect the change you and he are so certain will occur."

"Then we should try a hundred demons," Pazuzu said, nonchalantly.

Hazergal spat in disgust. "Do you know what happens to these demons, the ones I have 'absorbed'?"

"I would think that they are destroyed utterly, their souls extinguished to fuel your transformation," Pazuzu said, his tone even and flat, as if he were describing the process of brewing ale rather than the utter destruction of an intelligent entity. "Does this bother you?"

"Does it bother me?" Hazergal asked, incredulously. He was presented again with the unfathomable gulfs of difference between he and the

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demons that surrounded him. To Pazuzu the annihilation of a creature's soul was immaterial, as long as it wasn't his own. Hazergal still had the mind of a mortal human, and though he had lived a life of wickedness, there was enough humanity, enough mercy, left in him that the idea of such destruction was utterly abhorrent. "I can still feel them," Hazergal thumped his chest with a pincered claw. "That last moment of absolute horror that each one felt is mine to cherish always. So, yes it *bothers* me."

"Your mortal sentiments will not avail us here, Hazergal," Pazuzu said, his voice taking on a razor's edge. "You quibble over the souls of a few demons, when Yaghur Hod threatens the whole of the multiverse. Where is the honor in that? You would let him undermine the very fabric of reality in order to spare yourself the ridiculous human emotion of guilt? How can you be so daft?"

"You do not understand!" Hazergal suddenly raged. His mind was suddenly filled with a dozen spells that would burn, freeze, and flay the demon lord standing before him. Pazuzu saw the threat, and to his credit stood his ground.

"And thank the merciful gods of fate for that," the avian demon lord spat. "If my judgment was as clouded as yours, then we would truly be lost."

Hazergal forced down the riotous explosion of his emotions and forced himself to think clearly. "Then what do you suggest I do, *my lord*?" There was still heat in his voice.

"Gemnez is right," Pazuzu began. "You must effect another transformation, and become whatever it is you are meant to be. I am not a believer in destiny, but there is certainly something happening here that is beyond my understanding. I have lived for many thousands of years, and unlike the other fools that rule in the Abyss, I understand fully the threat that Yaghur Hod represents. If you hold the key to defeating him, or at least driving him back, then you cannot hesitate, or we are all lost."

Again, Hazergal was surprised by Pazuzu's sincerity, but still, he searched for the lie, searched for the grasping hand of advantage contained in the demon lord's words. "And what of your vengeance?" Hazergal asked. "I thought your sole reason for assisting us was the destroy the sword *Fiendbleeder*."

"I have not forgotten," Pazuzu said. "But I can hardly enjoy my revenge if Yaghur Hod destroys us all. I can see in your eyes that you doubt my sincerity, so let me make it plain for you. I am concerned only with my

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survival and the destruction of *Fiendbleeder*. In order to have any hope of either, I must rely on you. As we are, we don't stand a chance against Yaghur Hod. You alone offer hope of salvation, and I will not sit idly by and let you squander it. Is that clear enough."

Hazergal nodded, but said nothing. Again he turned to stare out over the plains of Vrack, letting his eyes focus on the distant horizon. He knew Pazuzu was correct. There was an awful power sleeping inside of him, and he knew that he had only scraped the surface of his potential. But to willingly destroy the soul of another? He wondered if his humanity could survive such a thing. Yet there was little choice. He could not deny that he wished to go on living, and if there was any hope of escaping the madness his existence had become, then Yaghur Hod must be defeated.

Hazergal closed his eyes and resigned himself to the rough caress of fate. "Tell me, what have you and Gemnez come up with?"

"Gemnez doubted you, but I thought you might submit to reason eventually," Pazuzu said, happily. The demon lord moved to stand close to Hazergal, and when the former archmage opened his eyes, he could see that Pazuzu's face was twisted in a hideous leer. "Listen closely, and I will tell you how we might utilize a resource that is … not living up to his full potential."

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Pyrak eased back into the familiar comfort of his throne. The black basalt beneath him was just as he remembered it, better even, for his mind painted a more pleasant picture than the cold stone of the real thing. He looked out over his throne room, at the polished white marble floors and the delicate carvings of the ivory pillars that ran its length. Now, those carvings danced and moved like living things, cavorting wildly to the whims of their creator. The air shimmered with smoky incense from three silver censors hanging from the ceiling. They hadn't existed in his real throne room. He had simply imagined them into being.

He was well pleased to have escaped from the endless dark of *Fiendbleeder's* mind. Since the sword apparently had no further need of him, it had left him alone and senseless with the formless dark of its own consciousness. But he had mastered the ability of shaping this prison, just as the deformed demon Chemosh had done, and he had recreated his old throne room, drawing it from the memories he held within his mind. He felt content for the first time in a long while, and as he settled into the stony embrace of his throne, the fear and anguish that had followed his death began to fade.

Pyrak put his head back against his throne to gaze up at the crystalline ceiling, and suddenly, his heart clenched with savage fear. In life, the transparent ceiling of his throne room on the Planes of Vrack had revealed the bruised Abyssal sky crawling with purple worm-like clouds, but now, in this facsimile, there was only darkness, a blank slate of gloom that was as empty as the dark prison *Fiendbleeder* had kept him in.

Glancing down the feathered length of his body, Pyrak was relieved to see that he was whole and well formed, just as he saw himself in his mind's eye. But if he could not remember every detail of his throne room, which memories would go next? He tore his gaze away from the ceiling, and felt the terrible fingers of despair grip his soul with terrible strength. The image of Chemosh, the malformed demon who had once wielded *Fiendbleeder* and had been absorbed by the sword, haunted Pyrak's mind. Was this to be his fate? To fade away until all that he could barely recall the

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demon lord he had once been? The thought was too horrific to bear.

"You seem troubled, Pyrak," a voice said from the other end of the throne room, where a set of massive double doors loomed. Once those doors led into the splendid floating citadel he had commanded in the planes of Vrack. Now he could only think of the swallowing darkness that likely lay beyond them.

"Who is there?" Pyrak growled, and rose from his throne, the long killing talons on the end of each finger clicking on the stone surface.

"Don't be alarmed; it is only I," the voice said. The lumpy, sagging from of Chemosh appeared from behind one of the carved pillars. The malformed demon lord bowed awkwardly. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to intrude, but I *felt* this wondrous place, and I couldn't bear to keep away."

Pyrak nodded and sat down. "How did you enter this place without my leave?" he asked, the barest hint of annoyance in his voice.

Chemosh smiled. "You did invite me," he said. "When you created this place."

"What do you mean?"

"This place, this wonderful place, is an invitation on its own," Chemosh said, waddling up to the base of the throne.

Pyrak smiled, although it did not carry to his sharp, avian eyes. "I suppose I did at that," he said. "I certainly don't want to sit here all alone. I've had all of that I can stomach."

"What troubles you?" Chemosh asked. "I can feel your fear. It fills this place."

Pyrak wondered how Chemosh could read him so well, and he felt a momentary flash of anger at being laid so bare. But he found he *wanted* to talk to someone, anyone. "Look up," he said after a long pause.

Chemosh tilted his ungainly head back to stare up at the ceiling. "Oh, lovely!" he exclaimed. "The crystal is beautiful, and it reminds me of … something."

"But there is nothing beyond it," Pyrak said. "I once remembered a sky and clouds and the wheeling shapes of my Dreadwings, but now, they are just vague recollections. I can't call them into being here."

Chemosh looked away from the ceiling and then directly at Pyrak. His squashed face was impassive, but his words chilled Pyrak to the core. "It is beginning, my friend," Chemosh said. "The memories fade over time, until there is nothing left but echoes and shadows. I'm sorry."

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Pyrak felt sick with fear. "Is there no way to be free of *Fiendbleeder*?" he asked, desperation straining in his voice.

"Maybe," Chemosh answered. "I think only the destruction of the sword would truly free us. But to what end, I don't know."

"I hardly think *Fiendbleeder* would go meekly to the slaughter," Pyrak said with unabashed disgust. "If it even can be destroyed."

Chemosh's face suddenly changed, and Pyrak again saw a glimmer of the creature he once was. "No, the sword is vulnerable," he said.

"To what?"

"It is not truly a whole entity, but is part of something larger," Chemosh said, his voice an almost mechanical reflex as he struggled to recall information from his faded memory. "It has grown, like a cancer, to be an individual entity outside of the whole that spawned it. It must be returned to its creator to be undone."

"How can you know this," Pyrak asked.

Chemosh smiled, and his black, lusterless eyes were suddenly filled with an incalculable depth of sorrow. "I don't know," he said. "I almost remembered something important … but it's gone now."

"A pity, " Pyrak said, sincerely. "I would dearly love to be free of *Fiendbleeder*, even if it meant true death."

"Maybe one of the others will remember," Chemosh said. "I think they will come now,"

The misshapen demon lord looked down at the floor, and there, for the first time, he noticed his reflection in the polished marble. "Oh," he exclaimed softly, and then suddenly sat down, his sagging, semi-amorphous body settling on the stone like a mound of unworked clay. Chemosh ran one of his thick, clumsy hands over the reflective surface, and his grotesque gash of a mouth turned down in a deep frown. "Is this truly what I look like?" he asked, sadly.

Pyrak had been a demon lord for thousands of years, and though in some ways he had behaved more nobly than his ilk, he had been as cruel and heartless as any of them. But now, seeing the pathetic wreck of a once mighty demon lord, he could not summon anything more than pity for Chemosh, and fear for himself. "Yes, the stone reflects truly," Pyrak said, softly. "But at least you are here, and perhaps together we can recall more of who you were." It was a calculated lie, but he could not bear to look upon such sorrow. It reminded him too much of his own plight.

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"Truly?" Chemosh said. His lumpy face contorted with wide-eyed hope. "If I could remember just a bit more, then may maybe I could look as you do, so strong and powerful."

"Perhaps." Pyrak conceded. "But let us speak of other things. You said the *others* might come. What did you mean by that?"

"The other souls that the sword has devoured," Chemosh said rising, to his feet. "They will not be able to resist all of *this*." He spread his arms wide to encompass the great open space of the throne room. "I think they will come soon, but I must warn you. They are not like me."

"How so?" Pyrak asked.

Chemosh grimaced. "I can remember enough to take this form in another's mind, or in my own. The other have forgotten so much of what and who they were, they are little more than shadows, echoes really, of their former selves."

"But perhaps they could be made to remember something that is useful to us, something that will allow us to escape this prison," Pyrak glanced around the throne room. "For prison it is, no matter how pleasant we attempt to make it."

"We can try, if you like," Chemosh said. "But even communicating with them can be difficult. Some of the oldest of us are barely sentient. As I said, only a few of us even remember our names."

"But I would like to try," Pyrak said. "Can you summon them?"

"Some of them are already here," Chemosh said. "Look around you."

Pyrak glanced around the throne room, and at first he saw nothing. Then, a few of the shadows cast by the carved pillars throughout the room began to shift and writhe, finally coalescing into three amorphous, inky shapes. These shapeless masses were hard to look at, for they had no real substance, although Pyrak thought he saw the insubstantial outline of something decidedly fiendish in each one.

The three shadowy forms glided across the polished marble of the throne room to the base of Pyrak's throne. They surrounded Chemosh, and the room was suddenly filled with a deep, sibilant whispering, a dreadful chorus of hissing syllables that Pyrak recognized as a very archaic form of Abyssal.

Is this the one you spoke of? a voice said, and Pyrak could not determine if the chilling whisper came from one or all of the formless shapes around Chemosh.

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"This is Pyrak, my lords," Chemosh said aloud. "The latest victim of *Fiendbleeder.*"

Pyrak stood and walked down the short steps to the floor. "Greetings," he said. "I welcome you to my … memories. What are your names?"

In reply to Pyrak's question the room exploded with a cacophony of whispers, and the shadowy forms of the three ancient demons seemed to shift and contort with what could only be described as terrible pain. *We … I … cannot … remember!* The despair contained in the last word was palpable, and it smote the ears of all in the room.

Pyrak retreated a step up his dais. "Forgive me," he said, alarmed. "I do not mean to cause you pain."

The terrible chorus of whispering continued, and then ended abruptly as two of the shadowy forms disappeared, winking out like snuffed candles. The remaining shadow seemed to pulse brighter, and a definite outline took shape within its wispy substance. *I … remember,* it said, slowly in a voice that was not a whisper but a soft, feminine tone, soothing and oddly pleasant. *I was Erishkegal.*

"My lady," Chemosh bowed, smiling. "I remember you as well. Before me, your were the sword's most recent … acquisition."

Chemosh, Erishkegal said. *I remember you, but who is this one?*

Pyrak saw that wispy substance that shrouded Erishkegal had begun to thin, and beneath he could see a definite feminine shape, although it was still indistinct and flickering. "I am Pyrak," he said. "*Fiendbleeder's* most recent master."

A soft guttural hissing suddenly filled the room, and Pyrak realizes that Erishkegal was laughing at him. *I have forgotten much, demon lord, but I still remember thinking as you do. None of us were the sword's masters. To think otherwise is very foolish.*

"Very well," Pyrak conceded. "There is certainly some truth in that. However, I do not wish to stay enslaved to the sword forever, or to fade away until I cannot even recall my own name, let alone this palace I have built from my extant memories."

What choice do you have? the whispery voice of Erishkegal said. Pyrak could not see the demoness's face through the cloud of smoky haze that obscured her, but he had the distinct feeling that she was smiling. *Do you think that others have not thought as you do? Do you think that those of us who have become little more than tired echoes wished for such a fate?*

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"Of course not," Pyrak said. "But to stand by and do nothing, where is the sense in that?"

Does he not remind you of someone, Chemosh? Erishkegal said. *His appearance and manner speak of one known to both of us. One who tasted the sword's power, but was never foolish enough to relinquish his will to it.*

"My lady, my memories are sorely lacking …" Chemosh began apologetically, but then his lumpy face twisted in a smile. "Wait. Yes, he reminds me of Pazuzu. Tell me Pyrak, does the Prince of the Air still live and rule?"

Pyrak's face twisted with distaste. "Yes, no one has managed to rid the Abyss of that pompous bastard yet, although not for any lack of trying on my part. What did you mean, 'he has tasted the sword's power'?" Pyrak asked. "I used the sword to wrest the Plains of Vrack from Pazuzu, and although he was wounded by *Fiendbleeder*, he escaped largely intact. But I don't see how you could have known that."

I had no knowledge of your conflict with Pazuzu, Erishkegal admitted. *But the Prince of Air did once possess* Fiendbleeder*, although the sword was never able to tempt him into relying upon its power, as it did with we three.*

"How do you know that?" Pyrak asked.

Because Fiendbleeder *was a gift from Pazuzu to me, shortly after I ascended to the rank of demon lord, as one of his vassals.*

"You are lying!" Pyrak scoffed. "Pazuzu is ancient, but I have heard your name before, Erishkegal, and if I remember my history, you disappeared five thousand years before I climbed out of the muck of the spawning pool."

Why would I lie? the demoness's whispery voice rang with sincerity. *You have allowed me to visit this splendid memory of yours, and in doing so, you have rekindled the flames of my own memories. For that I am grateful, and the least I owe you is the truth.*

"Very well," Pyrak said. "Perhaps you speak the truth, but this history lesson, fascinating though it may be, is not what I had hoped to speak to you and the other trapped demon lords about."

I am aware of your intentions, Pyrak, Erishkegal said, coolly. *I mention Pazuzu simply because he alone has resisted the sword pull, and all of us, every wretched fool trapped within this prison, were not able to do so. You must think on this, for we are still under the spell of* Fiendbleeder*, and in our current states, we can do little but hide from the sword. If it calls us forth, we can do nothing but obey, as it always was.*

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"So you are content to simply fade away?" Pyrak asked.

I resigned myself to such a fate long ago, Erishkegal sighed. *But I will not lie to you: your presence, the fierce vigor of your memories, has filled me with a desire I had long forgotten.*

"And what desire is that?" Pyrak asked pointedly.

"Freedom, of course," Chemosh answered, softly. "The freedom to either move on to whatever else the multiverse has in store for us, or finally, cease to exist. This torturous consumption, this limbo we are trapped within, is neither."

"Then you will help me convince the others?"

Convince them to do what? Erishkegal asked. *What kind of rebellion do you think you might foment from here? It is true that Fiendbleeder cannot see into our individual minds, or these constructs we are able to create, but if the sword were to learn that so many of us lingered, or that we sought to undermine its goals* … she trailed off.

"It would … what? Destroy us?" Pyrak finished. "Is even that not preferable to eternal suffering, losing your mind and identity to the hungry march of time?"

Chemosh nodded, and Pyrak thought he caught a glimpse of thoughtful, feminine eyes behind Erishkegal's smoky mask. *I cannot deny the truth in your words, Pyrak,* she said. *But you must understand that convincing the others to aid us may be difficult … you frighten them.*

"What? Why?"

Chemosh frowned. "The others have been without memory and even sentient thought for so long that the very idea of this place you have created fills them with horror. It is like a creature that has dwelled in darkness for an eternity suddenly being thrust into the sun. The light is a rapturous thing, but it burns nonetheless."

But they may listen to us, Erishkegal said. *No matter how much of themselves they have lost, there still remains some part that wishes for more than slow destruction.*

"Then you will help me?" Pyrak asked.

"Yes, we will help you as much as we are able," Chemosh said. "But even if you manage to unite all of us towards this purpose, what hope do we have of freedom. As I told you, only the sword's destruction would likely free us."

"And I believe you," Pyrak said, smiling. "But there are things occurring beyond the walls of this prison that may bring about our liberation."

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"*Fiendbleeder* has allowed you to see into the world beyond?" Erishkegal asked.

"Yes, and as I said, there are things in motion that may give us a chance to bring about the sword's end." Pyrak said. "But as of late, *Fiendbleeder* has not summoned me into its presence, and it is there I must return in order to accomplish what I have in mind."

"You will tell us what you have planned, I should hope," Chemosh said.

"Of course," Pyrak said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "But first I need you to rally the others to our cause. Then I will tell you everything."

"Very well, I will begin at once." Chemosh said, and then blinked out of existence, leaving the construct of Pyrak's mind for the darkness of the void.

Erishkegal lingered at the base of Pyrak's throne, however. The demon lord could see that more of the demoness's shape was becoming distinct, a powerful feminine form that filled him with both lust and dread. The wispy shadows had thinned considerably around her head, but all Pyrak could see were two liquid eyes, like iridescent pearls shining in a black fog. *Thank you, Pyrak,* she said after a few moments. *It has been a pleasure to visit you here. I hope that I may return before this ends in either folly or freedom.*

"You may visit me any time you like," Pyrak said, magnanimously. "I should think that few demons, living or dead, have had the honor of entertaining the *Queen* of the Abyss."

Pyrak sensed a smile behind the smoky curtain that shrouded Erishkegal's face. *You* do *remember your history, young one,* she said. *But I forfeited any such titles when my soul was devoured by the sword, and to tell you truthfully, I have no desire to regain them.*

"Then what do you hope for, my queen?" Pyrak asked.

An end, Erishkegal said softly, and then faded from view like smoke caught in a stiff breeze.

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"Hazergal," Gemnez said, his fleshy brow creased with worry. "I beg you to reconsider."

His voice echoed around the cavernous hall that had recently become the center of their war effort against Yaghur Hod. It was a mammoth space, easily large enough to accommodate the oversized forms of the three archfiends and dozens of smaller fiends besides. It had lain long unused and empty in the bowels of Gemnez Drak, but Gemnez and Hazergal thought it a far better meeting place than Hedrenatherax's throne room in Hedrax, partly because it was far larger, and partly because everyone had long since tired of the newly made demon lord gloating like a great king from his throne.

"No, if I am to do this, then it shall be done with as little treachery as possible," Hazergal replied. "Either that, or we abandon it entirely."

Gemnez opened his mouth to offer further protest, but then simply turned away, a look of profound disgust plastered across his wide, rouge-splattered face. "Asinine folly," he proclaimed under his breath, and strode a short distance away, fuming.

"And what do you two think about my decision?" Hazergal asked pointedly, directing his question at the two demon lords that lounged casually on massive, plush divans. Pazuzu was sipping at a goblet of some green, viscous fluid while Hedrenatherax was sucking the flesh off of dretch bones with great relish and gusto. The archfiends looked like the two most horrific sybarites in the multiverse.

Hedrenatherax spat a bone from his tusked mouth onto the massive pile next to his divan, and wiped the blood from his mouth with a swipe of his hand. "I could care less what happens to you *or* Orcus," he said. "There isn't a paladin's chance in hell that we will defeat Yaghur Hod anyway, regardless of whether you steal that great, fat fool's essence, or whatever freakish thing you do to affect these changes."

"And you," Hazergal said, turning to Pazuzu.

"You know my mind, Hazergal," the feathered demon lord said. "I believe the death of Orcus may be the deciding factor in our struggle with

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Yaghur Hod, but to challenge him this way, alone, that is folly."

Hazergal shook his massive canine head. "I do not expect you to understand," he said. "If I am to take his blood upon my hands, then I would do it openly, without subterfuge."

"Spoken like a human who doesn't have the first inkling of how Abyssal politics function," Pazuzu spat. "Do you think Orcus would offer you such a *noble* alternative to simple execution? No. He would set upon you with a thousand demons and then, once you were weakened, he would crush your skull with the great mace of his and proclaim himself the victor."

"Why try to talk him out of it?" Hedrenatherax said with a shrug. "Personally, I hope they kill each other and give us a good show in the process."

Showing the multitudinous array of fangs that lined his mouth, Hazergal again forced his inhuman face to smile, this time at Hedrenatherax, "I wouldn't let Azadan see that you've been feasting on dretches," he said. "He has quite a fondness for the little creatures."

Suddenly Hedrenatherax surged to his feet. "I'll eat whatever I bloody well please!" he roared.

Still smiling, Hazergal stared the massive demon lord in the eyes. "Very well, you can tell him that when he returns." Azadan had been sent to fetch Orcus and bring him to the great hall. There was little doubt that the demon lord would expect something, but what choice did he have but to comply? He was alone — Gemnez had already bribed or assassinated each member of his entourage — and surrounded by enemies and false friends.

"If that slimy little bastard thinks he can tell me what do, I'll feed his balls to those dretches he so loves," Hedrenatherax continued to rage, although he began kicking his discarded dretch bones beneath his divan and out of plain view. Hazergal didn't think that Hedrenatherax actually feared Azadan, but he certainly had no desire to tangle with the powerful babau warrior if he could avoid it. Azadan had humiliated him once, and that, to a demon lord, was far more abhorrent than something so simple and common as death.

The great double doors at the far end of the hall suddenly swung open, admitting the relatively tiny form of Azadan, armed and armored in his glittering black scale, followed by the enormous, bloated person of Orcus.

Orcus was smiling, his goat-like face twisted in a horrid smirk. He came willingly enough, trudging down the length of the great hall to stand before his peers and enemies. Azadan moved to stand beside Hazergal, one

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taloned hand resting on the hilt of his sword. The babau looked worried. Of all the fiends in the room, he had opposed Hazergal's plan the most vehemently, although he had done so in private. But despite his objection, the fierce babau warrior had vowed to stand beside his friend and master and support his decision.

"My lords," Orcus said, with a bow. "It has been too long since I last enjoyed the pleasure of your company. I have been so lonely since my entourage abandoned my service. How do they fare, Gemnez? Well, I hope."

"They are fine, Lord Orcus," Gemnez said with an obsequious smile. "They serve their new master ably."

"Good," Orcus said. "I would hate to think that their treachery was not well rewarded."

"You must have known it would come to this, *Orky*," Pazuzu said, sipping at his goblet.

"Come to what, my lord?" Orcus asked with feigned innocence. "Certainly you do not mean to imply that yet more treachery is afoot? I would hate to think ill of you or our gracious host Hedrenatherax."

"I don't give a dretch's gonads what you *think* of me," Hedrenatherax said contemptuously. "And I think we can dispense with the all of these bloody pleasantries."

"Oh, Hedrenatherax, you are such a bore," chided Pazuzu. "Let *Orky* have his say before we have done with him."

"Have done with me?" Orcus asked with feigned surprise. "Whatever do you mean, my lord?"

"Unfortunately, my dear bloated friend," Pazuzu began with mock sympathy. "It would seem that you are of much more use to us dead than alive."

"And you and your *allies* here mean to set upon me to obtain that desired state, I assume?" Orcus said calmly.

"No, you will be given a fair chance to defend yourself," Hazergal broke in. "If you emerge from this room alive, then you will be free to leave here and do as you please."

"Ah, it is to be a duel then," Orcus said. "What drivel is this, Pazuzu? Certainly you, Hedrenatherax, and your pet devil there have no intentions of allowing me to leave here alive."

"No," Pazuzu said with a frown. "Even though I can hardly endorse this idiocy, it is the truth."

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"Hah!" Orcus threw his goat-like head back and guffawed. "Who am I to face, then? You, Pazuzu? I should hope so, you and I have been down that path before." The great demon lord smiled wickedly. "I would die happily enough if I were able to take you with me."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Orky," Pazuzu said with a sickly sweet smile. "But it shall not be I you face this day?"

"Who then, Hedrenatherax? Gemnez?" Orcus scoffed. "Are they so ready to meet death that they would challenge me alone?"

"You should count yourself lucky, *my lord*," Hedrenatherax snarled, insulted. "I would you make you suffer before I spilled your fat guts on the floor."

"You? Hah!" Orcus's laughter boomed throughout the hall. "I was buggering demon lords of your ilk before you even climbed from the spawning pit."

Hedrenatherax's face darkened with rage, and his hand crept down to the hilt of his falchion. "Let us get this farce over with," he breathed through clenched teeth, struggling to swallow his rage.

"You will be facing me, Lord Orcus," Hazergal said. "If you kill me, then you shall be free to go."

Orcus stared at Hazergal his mouth crinkled in distaste. "You, a simple glabrezu? What manner of buffoonery is this?"

"Unfortunately, there is no treachery here," Gemnez said with a sigh. "And Hazergal is no simple glabrezu, as you will soon find out."

"I don't care how extraordinary he is, he's still only a glabrezu with a bit of talent for sorcery." Orcus said. "However, if you want to throw this poor fool's life away, then be my guest."

Gemnez sighed, Pazuzu smirked, and Hedrenatherax licked his tusks in hungry anticipation of what was to come.

"Are you offering any assurances that I will be allowed to go free once I've splattered your glabrezu all over this hall?" Orcus said. "Not that I would trust any of them."

"We will invoke the rite of *Hevak Durr*," Gemnez said, containing a shudder as he spoke. "There can be no great assurance than that."

Orcus blinked in surprise. "The champion's rite?" he breathed. "That has not been used since — "

"Since Pyrak slew Beyemon in Avernus," Pazuzu finished. "I trust you would accept this duel under the terms of *Hevak Durr*?"

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"But the rite can only be enacted between a devil and a demon," Orcus said. "How will it work if I am to battle Hazergal?"

"That is true," Gemnez said. "However, I have researched the subject thoroughly, and it seems that either of the fiends that enact the rite can choose a proxy to fight in his stead. Asmodeus did it in an ancient battle with the demon lord Soccoth-Benoth. The Lord of the Nine invoked the rite and then allowed a powerful daemon mercenary by the name of Bubonis to fight in his stead."

"So you and I will invoke the rite and then you will choose Hazergal as your proxy?" Orcus asked. The great demon lord's face was a mix of incredulity and hope. He sensed the very real opportunity to leave Gemnez Drak alive, although he could scarce believe it.

"Just so," Gemnez replied. "We can begin whenever you are ready."

Orcus drew his massive skull headed mace from his girdle and propped it over one shoulder. "I'm ready," he said. "I've had enough of your hospitality, Gemnez. And I mean to have done with it one way or the other."

"Hazergal," Gemnez said. "Come stand beside me." Hazergal did as he was asked and the two fiends stepped out into the center of the hall where Orcus awaited.

Orcus ran his right palm over one of the spiky projections on his mace, making a shallow cut that wept black, viscous blood. "With my blood, I implore the Lords of Chaos to sanctify this ground," he said.

In response Gemnez brought his own palm up to his mouth and nipped the flesh delicately with his needle-like fangs. "With my blood I appeal to the might of law to sanctify this ground," he called out.

Hazergal followed the two archfiends by lacerating the palm of one human-like hand by running it over the serrated edge of one of his pincered claws. "With my blood I assume the mantle of Law," he recited the words Gemnez had given him to say, and then placed his bleeding hand over Gemnez's, letting his blood mingle with the devil's. Gemnez then stepped back and Hazergal moved toward Orcus.

Hazergal and Orcus met in the center of the great hall and clasped their bleeding hands together. Hazergal felt a jolt of energy run up his arm, not painful, but mildly unpleasant. By the look on Orcus's face, he felt it as well. Both fiends drew in a breath, and shouted together, "*Duvash mehedrek, Hevak Durr!*"

The world suddenly disappeared in a flash of blinding, white light, and

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both Hazergal and Orcus stumbled away from each other. Hazergal was momentarily blinded by the radiant blast, and when he could see again, he saw a most peculiar site. Gemnez, Azadan, Pazuzu, and Hedrenatherax stood, or sat, or reclined in perfect stillness, their bodies frozen in place like bizarre, life-like statues. There was no sound other than the shuffling scrape of Orcus's feet on the stone floor a dozen paces away, as the demon lord struggled to regain his bearings from the heady sensation of the rite.

Hazergal wasted no time in contemplating the bizarre results of the rite of Hevak Durr and unleashed half a dozen spells as they raced to the fore of his mind. He plumbed the depth of his arcane power and girded himself with protective magic to ward off spells, blows, and the dread caress of Orcus's necromantic touch. By the time he had finished casting, Orcus had recovered and came charging across the hall, his great, heavy mace held in both hands.

Hazergal's mind paged through the uncataloged repertory of spells, curses, and enchantments that lay within his mind. Dozens of dire magics stood out prominently, each one bearing a subtle ache, a crimson desire to be unleashed and wreak destruction upon his foe. The spell he finally chose was a simple one, but very deadly.

Orcus was almost on top of Hazergal when the former archmage simply clenched the fist of one of his human-like hands and spat forth a single guttural syllable. The spell seemed to strike the demon lord like a great, invisible fist, and he stopped dead in his tracks, pain clouding his features. Orcus dropped to a knee, beads of slick, black sweat forming on his brow, and he clutched at his chest with one flabby hand.

Hazergal held out his clenched fist, slowly tightening his grip, and began moving slowly away from the demon lord, his face a mask of concentration. Orcus's eyes had grown very wide, and his breath came in short, desperate gasps. The demon lord's fingers dug into the flesh over his heart in a vain attempt to staunch the terrible pressure building there. But then he smiled: a terrible grimace through the teeth of almost unbearable agony. "Not … good … enough," he wheezed, and whipped his mace over his head, hurling the great chunk of metal and bone through the air like a giant, soaring battering ram.

The tactic caught Hazergal completely off his guard, and the giant mace slammed into his chest, smashing him to the ground and crushing the air form his lungs. The spell he had been concentrating on fled his

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mind like so much smoke in a windstorm, and pain flooded his senses. His human-like arms were crushed, the bones shattered by the terrible impact of Orcus's mace.

Cold fear gripped him now. With his human-like hands injured, he could not make the complicated somatic gestures needed to unleash his most powerful spells. His advanced knowledge of arcana allowed him to cast minor spells with nothing more than a thought, but such magic would avail him little against Orcus.

Free from Hazergal's terrible spell, Orcus climbed shakily to his feet and unleashed a spell of his own. The demon lord pointed one finger at his downed opponent and rattled off a series of cryptic arcane syllables. A ray of greasy black energy shot from the demon lord's outstretched finger and struck Hazergal as he was rising from the ground. The spell, however, did not have the effect Orcus had hoped for, and its dire energy dissipated in a flash as it encountered one of Hazergal's magical wards.

"It will take more than that feeble charm to bring me down, Hazergal," Orcus said, smiling coldly, although he still rubbed at his chest. The demon lord held out one massive, fleshy hand, and his mace skittered across the floor and into his waiting grip.

Having regained his feet, Hazergal was still swaying drunkenly from the pain in his shattered arms. He was certainly not helpless. His massive pincered claws could cut through steel, and his body was as massive and powerful as Orcus's own. However, his opponent had fought thousands of battles and was skilled with his mace in a way that Hazergal could not hope to duplicate with his claws. If he could not bring Orcus low with magic, he would have to engage the demon lord in hand-to-hand combat, a frightening prospect to say the least. Azadan had been working with him, teaching him the basics of melee combat with a maul, which he had now cursed himself for leaving behind, and he hoped he might be able to put some of that instruction to use, even without the weapon. With little option available to him, Hazergal flooded his body with a number of minor enchantments designed to heighten his strength, agility, and stamina. If he must resort to brawling with Orcus, then he would do it to the best of his ability.

Orcus, feeling that the tide of the battle had somehow changed, was taking his time. He circled Hazergal slowly, his great, bloated body moving with a grace that belied his ponderous size. "How did they talk you into

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this folly, Hazergal?" he asked, swishing his mace from side to side as he drew closer.

Hazergal held both claws open and spread his arms wide. He matched Orcus's movements, trying to stay out of his opponent's range. *Let the overconfident opponent come to you*, Azadan had said during one of their practice sessions. *He will often reveal a weakness in his haste and hubris.* Hazergal hoped his friend was correct, for Orcus certainly had an abundance of confidence, while he had very little. "This was my idea," he said. "I wanted you to have a chance to defend yourself properly."

Orcus chuckled. "While I salute your nobility, odd as it is, it's going to get you killed." The huge demon lord then surged forward, his mace lashing out in a lightning-fast strike. The lunge was so quick, it caught Hazergal unaware, but Orcus had misjudged the range between himself and his opponent, and his blow fell short by inches. The heavy weapon whistled through empty air, its great weight pulling its owner off balance for a split second, time enough for Hazergal to lash out with both claws, and rake them across his opponent's back. The serrated edges of each claw, further enhanced by Hazergal's magic, cut a deep a furrow in Orcus's flesh, splattering his thick, black blood in all directions.

The demon lord howled in pain and brought his mace up in an underhand strike, recovering far more quickly than Hazergal had anticipated. The former archmage leapt back, but not swiftly enough to avoid a numbing blow to the inside of his left knee. Orcus did not press his attack, however, and stepped out of range. Hazergal followed suit and limped back, cursing.

Hazergal stared across the great hall at his opponent, who was grimacing in pain, and leaking a steady stream of blood onto the stone floor. Even wounded, Orcus was still the better fighter, but Hazergal had learned something. He had greater reach. Orcus was solidly built and possessed of hideous strength, but his arms and legs were relatively short for his stature. Hazergal, on the other hand, enjoyed the multi-jointed reach of his glabrezu pincer arms, which were so long they hung down past his knees. He figured he had at least a foot of reach on Orcus, which might be enough to get in one crucial strike.

"Come on, then," Orcus said, his face a rictus of pain and anger. "These little scratches aren't going to slow me any."

"In good time," Hazergal said and began to circle to his opponent's right, away from his weapon hand. His knee still throbbed, causing him

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to limp noticeably, and he wanted to keep Orcus talking, hoping to buy precious seconds for his limb to recover. Hazergal ran through the minor spells he could cast without the use of his shattered arms, and found one that might aid him, if he could time it perfectly.

Orcus suddenly muttered a chain of necromantic grunts, and his body flared with a sudden black nimbus. The necromantic energy sealed the rents in his back with more sickly gray flesh, and the rejuvenated demon lord smiled across the hall at is opponent, and made a great show of stretching his newly healed back. "Much better," he said. "I plan to reward you, Hazergal, for your nobility and for the unexpected challenge you have presented. I will kill you quickly, and then reanimate your corpse, so you shall be first among my servants when I rebuild my empire."

"My lord is too gracious," Hazergal said, but his sarcasm did little to hide his failing confidence. The numbness in his left leg had faded, leaving behind a dull ache that he knew meant broken bones. "Death and the prospect of eternity as a walking corpse, how could I refuse?"

"You can't," Orcus said simply, and charged.

Hazergal watched Orcus barrel across the hall, covering the distance with great, earth-shaking strides. The demon lord grinned as he came, his mace once again gripped in both hands. Hazergal stood his ground and waited. If he surmised correctly, Orcus would not expect what he was about to do. The demon lord knew that Hazergal had some arcane ability, although he had no idea the true depth and power the former human commanded. But with his crushed arms, Hazergal could not call upon his most powerful magics, with which he might easily obliterate his opponent. He was forced to use simple spells, and although these magics were not sufficient to directly harm Orcus, Hazergal could cast them with little more than a thought, giving his opponent no chance to react to them.

Orcus reached Hazergal and brought his mace above his head in a brutal, overhand strike that would have certainly crushed the former archmage's skull. But Hazergal had been waiting for just such a blow, and he had timed his spell perfectly. The air shimmered around the former human as a small dimensional rift opened around him. He disappeared and then reappeared instantly, roughly a foot from his original position, just far enough for Orcus's mace to miss him by a hair's breadth. The heavy weapon slammed into the ground, and again, the demon lord was thrown off balance.

This time, however, Hazergal had been expecting the opening, and

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made the most of it. Both of his massive pincers shot forward to clamp, vise-like, around Orcus's neck, and then he squeezed with all his might, sinking the serrated barbs of each claw into the demon lord's flesh.

Bucking and jerking with all his might, Orcus tried in vain to wrench free from Hazergal's terrible grip. He battered at his opponent with his mace, landing heavy blows against Hazergal's torso, back, and legs. The wizard-turned-demon felt bones shatter with each caress of the terrible weapon, but still he held on, until finally, Orcus's eyes went wide with pain and horror. His struggles first weakened, and then stopped. The great, skull-headed mace clattered to the floor, and the demon lord's head came free from his body with a gush of sticky, black ichor.

Hazergal cast his opponent's severed head away, and sank to the ground, a miasma of pain clouding his mind. His body was a wreck of contusions and shattered bones, many of which poked through his flesh, for such was the force that had broken them. His own blood, shockingly red and thick, poured from his body, pooling beneath him in a spreading crimson stain.

Hazergal noticed that the rest of the fiends in the great hall remained frozen, as if time had stopped for everyone but him. The bloated corpse of Orcus lay before him like a mountain of spoiled flesh, the slain demon lord's inky blood fouling the spreading tide of Hazergal's own. He felt a smothering darkness closing in as consciousness faded in the wake of blood loss and shock. His eyelids became impossibly heavy, and he fought against the desire to just close his eyes and drift away from the torment, doubt, and despair his life had come. But the multiverse wasn't through with Hazergal Redfist yet.

The room was suddenly bathed in an eldritch blue glow, and Hazergal watched with horror as the headless carcass of Orcus climbed, tottering, to its feet, shrouded in azure fire. It began to move towards Hazergal.

He tried to get up, to flee from the risen horror, but his battered legs crumpled beneath him, and all he could manage was to crawl, pathetically, away from the terrible spectacle unfolding before him.

"*This one is not like the others,*" a disembodied voice suddenly boomed, filling the room and every fiber of Hazergal's being with a sibilant monotone.

"*Is he worthy?*" another voice said. This one had a harsh, jangling quality, like glass breaking, or the terrible shriek of tearing metal.

"*The rite of ascension does not judge worthiness,*" a third voice whispered. It was sepulchral, dark, and horrifying. "*This one will serve. He will serve well.*"

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"What are you?" Hazergal howled, still scuttling away from Orcus's glowing corpse as it slowly advanced toward him.

There was silence for a moment, and then a chorus of voices spoke, a screaming gale of the three Hazergal had heard combined into to one dreadful, crushing torrent. "*Usurper, do you claim this body's rank and power?*" the all-in-one voice asked.

Hazergal knew that a pivotal moment had come, and that fate had once again tangled him, quite inexorably, in its silken grasp. He looked up at the headless corpse of Orcus, where it stood, still now, a few feet away. Somehow he found the strength to stand, the searing pain of shattered bones hardly registering as he climbed to his feet to meet his destiny.

"I claim this power," he said. "I claim it for myself, and I claim it for those I must protect."

"*So be it, demon,*" the tripartite voice said. "*Then accept our blessing.*"

A torrent of bright blue flame suddenly gushed from the stump of Orcus's neck. It flowed, serpent-like, across the short space between the animated corpse and Hazergal. The flame slammed into the former human, immolating his face and upper body. The pain was beyond anything Hazergal had ever experienced, as the azure fire burned away flesh and bone, to reveal a gleaming new skin beneath.

The raw fire of change also filled Hazergal's mind, and he saw the staggering complexity of the multiverse laid bare and vulnerable to his scrutinizing gaze. The entirety of creation seemed to be a vast, undulating web of glowing blue fire, the very foundation of everything in its simplest form. He felt the overwhelming presence of entities that he could scarcely define, squatting like massive, bloated spiders in the web of creation, manipulating the strands of time, fate, and energy at their whim. He saw all of this and realized his place, his function in the scheme of all things. He was the catalyst, free of the base twisting of fate, yet unavoidably bound to it. It was an awful power that was thrust upon him, far more than any he had yet known. But as the light faded, and the web and its occupants became ghost-like constructs of his tortured mind, he felt another presence, his diametric opposite. He saw the empty, bulbous eyes of Yaghur Hod staring at him through the hazy mists of reality, and he felt the yawning emptiness of the Archodaemon's soul, a hungry abyss that ached to be filled with anything, everything.

And then the vision was gone, and the pain faded from his flesh. Hazergal opened new eyes to find himself standing in the great hall, looking

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down at the corpse of Orcus, now dispossessed of its fiendish animation. He saw that his own body had changed as well. No longer did he wear the hulking form of the glabrezu. In fact, his body resembled no demon he was familiar with. His limbs, human-like in every regard, seemed to be carved of solid onyx, as flexible as living flesh, yet as hard as the stone they resembled. Glowing crimson runes covered every inch of his body, carved into his rock-like integument, immutable and permanent. Hazergal recognized the glowing sigils as the script of magic, the universal language of change and manipulation.

"What name do you take for yourself, demon lord?" The terrible, blended voice said.

Hazergal felt the name flow into his mind, as if it had always been there, waiting patiently for his lips and tongue to give it voice. He whispered the name lovingly into the still and empty air, "I am Hazag, Prince of Change."

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The shadow demons of Shuvon Dreth's Abyssal horde flowed over a nightmarish landscape of crumbling ruins that jutted tooth-like from the hard, black soil of the Abyssal plane. The shadow demons came on, wispy and insubstantial, like a tide of smoke, filling in the spaces between the ruins and coursing like estuaries of some vast and terrible ocean. The shadow demons hissed and whispered together, creating a terrible cacophony, as if some ill wind had been unleashed, driving Shuvon Dreth's host down upon his foes.

Yaghur Hod watched his enemy's forces advance, cursing the ruin-choked landscape that surrounded Igrazaz, Shuvon Dreth's fortified city in the heart of his domain. The great Archodaemon had led his forces into the wasted and barren landscape, expecting to bring the entire host to bear upon his foe. The almost featureless black plane had surprised Yaghur Hod and his generals when they had pierced the shadowy vale of Shuvon Dreth's demesne, and it had filled them with confidence. It would be easy to move the hundreds of thousands of daemonic troops onto the flat and easily negotiated terrain. The daemonic army had encountered no resistance as they moved through the eerily silent layer, until at last they grew near to the Abyssal city of Igrazaz. There, the landscape had become a confusing jumble of cyclopean ruins, as if a hundred cities had been built, each a bit further from the last, and then destroyed.

The ruins stretched for miles around Igrazaz, and they presented a serious challenge for Yaghur Hod. He could not bring his entire army to bear upon his enemy, thereby all but nullifying his superior numbers. In addition, the insubstantial nature of Shuvon Dreth's shadow demons — the only type he seemed to command — allowed them to navigate the broken landscape with relative ease.

"Turgon," Yaghur Hod said. "Find me Nyxus." The great daemon stood well away from the front of his army, although he had no fear of engaging the enemy himself. The front ranks were composed primarily of cryptodaemons, with ranks of the stronger terradaemons behind them. It was the leader of the terradaemons that Yaghur Hod needed now.

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"Of course, master," replied the crocodile-headed Turgon, who stood next to the great daemon. The cacodaemon commander was always near by, always ready with a fawning word or an obsequious gesture. He was an irritating creature, but Yaghur Hod found that his intellect and grasp of daemonic politics — which the Archodaemon had no stomach for — was second to none. "I believe he is commanding our left flank, so it may take me some time to find him," Turgon continued. "Do you have a message for my esteemed colleague, or should I simply fetch him here?"

Today, Yaghur Hod wore the face of the old human man, one of his favorites. His thin lips crinkled in the slightest of grins. He knew full well that Turgon and Nyxus despised one another, and he also knew that the cacodaemon was hoping he would be allowed to deliver some rebuke on his master's behest to his rival. "No, Turgon, just bring him here. Now."

Turgon bowed, and then disappeared through the thong of daemons, of all shapes and sizes, that surrounded Yaghur Hod, acting as a buffer in case the fighting got too close. There was considerable space around the Archodaemon; none of the lesser daemons wanted to be close enough to their terrible master to be noticed. In addition, the great, scaly form of The Beast squatted next to Yaghur Hod, a mountain of alien flesh, horrible in all aspects, even to the hardened minds of fiends.

The Beast turned its misshapen head and stared down at Yaghur Hod, its massive, lantern-like eyes splashing a weird green luminance upon the Abyssal ground. The Archodaemon tried not to flinch away from that stare, but as mighty as he was, the elder horror at his side still filled him with reckless dread.

I grow hungry, the Beast's voice, cold and terrible, bloomed within Yaghur Hod's mind.

"Once we take the city, there will be many souls for you to feed upon," Yaghur Hod said, craning his neck to stare up at the colossal form of the Beast.

The Beast turned its hideous gaze from Yaghur Hod and stared out across the ruins and the city beyond. *I feel them,* it said. *They will feed me, or yours will. It makes no difference to me.*

"I understand," Yaghur Hod said. "You will dine well before this day is out. I promise you that."

So be it, usurper. Yaghur Hod thought he could hear the slightest hint of rage, old and wounding, in the Beast's voice. The word *usurper* was

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pregnant with dire meaning, and the Archodaemon could only surmise that to this ancient creature, all the fiends that had spread across the lower planes were one and the same: mere inheritors of the glory and chaos of the shadowy past. *I will help you break the city's walls*, the Beast continued. *But you must clear a path.*

"It shall be done," Yaghur Hod said with a nod. A tremendous wail and the thudding impact of bodies colliding drew the Archodaemon's attention back to the front line, where the first wave of shadow demons were engaging the front rank of cryptodaemons.

Shuvon Dreth's shadow demons, although composed of flesh and bone, had the terrible ability to make themselves partially ethereal. This allowed them to rip their long, serrated talons through armor, natural or otherwise, with appalling ease. In addition, while partially immaterial, they were difficult to hurt with conventional weapons, such as the cryptodaemon's mandibles or the short swords they wielded.

The shadow demons went through the front rank of cryptodaemons in a tidal wave of slaughter, only to be checked by the terradaemons beyond and their enchanted mauls. The larger daemons' weapons wreaked havoc on the shadow demons, but the jumbled landscape did not allow the larger fiends to bring their full strength upon their enemies. They were able to effect little more than a temporary stalemate.

Occasional flashes of fire and lightning lit up the battlefield, as groups of cacodaemons, placed well behind the cryptodaemons and terradaemons, discharged destructive spells into the boiling mass of shadow demons. The magic took its toll, slaying scores of Shuvon Dreth's demons, but the masses of stone ruins and shattered buildings provided excellent cover from the magical bombardment, reducing its overall effectiveness.

Yaghur Hod's azodaemons, circling above in a mighty flock thousands strong, also suffered from the battered landscape. The same ruins that provided cover against the cacodaemons' spells also prevented the flying daemons from putting their formidable talents to better use.

Yaghur Hod cursed silently. He had no doubt that he would eventually wear down Shuvon Dreth's Abyssal horde despite the rough terrain, but he would suffer unacceptable losses as a result. If he was to win this battle handily, he needed to make the battlefield more conducive to his army's strength and numbers. The answer to his problem was not far out of reach, and was represented in the hulking form of the terradaemon

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commander Nyxus, as he emerged from the daemonic horde to stand before his master.

"Master, the left flank is holding, but we are suffering heavy losses," Nyxus said, casting a wary glance up at the massive, hideous form of the Beast.

"Where is Turgon?" Yaghur Hod asked.

Nyxus frowned. "He returned to his cacodaemons," the great terradaemon said. "Perhaps to bolster their magic with his own. Although I don't see what good it will do. The damn shadow demons just hide in the ruins as soon as the spells start flying."

"I am aware," Yaghur Hod said dismissively. "And I need you to level our battlefield a bit."

Nyxus grunted and nodded. "It could be done, but I'd need all my daemons together to pull it off," he said. "But if I remove my forces from the battlefield, the cryptodaemons will be overwhelmed, and we will likely be routed."

"We will fill in the ranks temporarily with azodaemons and cacodaemons," Yaghur Hod said. "How long will it take you to clear the area?"

"Not long, master," Nyxus said. "But the cacodaemons are cowards and azodaemons are near useless on the ground. I fear that the entire line would crumble."

Yaghur Hod stroked the great red gem hanging from a silver chain at his neck. "They will hold long enough for you to do what is needed," he said. "Once the way is clear, you and your terradaemons must rejoin the battle immediately. Understood?"

"Yes, master," Nyxus said with a bow. "I will not fail you."

"Good. Now go and explain to Turgon his part in this."

Nyxus could not hide the smile that was forming on his broad, blocky lips. The chance to deliver such news to his rival was sweeter than all the victories he had accumulated under Yaghur Hod's command. "With pleasure, master," he said, and headed off to mobilize his daemons.

Yaghur Hod turned his gaze skyward, where the massive flock of azodaemons hovered. His mind singled out the largest of the flying daemons, and he conveyed his wishes to the azodaemon commander Zeeosh. *Attend me now,* Yaghur Hod thought at his servant. Seconds later, a single azodaemon broke off from the wheeling flock and sped groundward toward the Archodaemon.

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Zeeosh landed with a flurry of leather wings a few feet from his master, bowed his grotesque, bat like head, and said, "What do you require of me, master?"

"In a few moments, Nyxus and his terradaemons will pull back from the front line," Yaghur Hod said. "I need you and your azodaemons to take their places temporarily."

Zeeosh's massive, bulbous eyes flew wide with shock. "You want us to fight on the ground, master?" the azodaemon asked in disbelief.

"Yes, but only for a short time," Yaghur Hod said, holding up both hands in a conciliatory gesture. "I will need you in the air immediately after Nyxus clears the battlefield."

"We will be slaughtered, master," Zeeosh protested. "Our battle prowess is in the air," the azodaemon shuddered with revulsion, "not on the ground."

"I know this," Yaghur Hod said, and casually strokes the *Archonatrix* around his neck. "But you must trust me. I would not put you and yours in needless danger."

Zeeosh bowed his head. "It shall be done, master."

"Then make haste. We will need your azodaemons soon."

The azodaemon bowed again, and then leapt into the air, spiraling upward to bring Yaghur Hod's command to his daemons.

Yaghur Hod turned his attention back to the front line, where the terradaemons were withdrawing in an orderly fashion. Cryptodaemons raced to fill the gaps, along with a much smaller number of cacodaemons. Once the terradaemons had drawn away from the fore of the army, Zeeosh and his azodaemons descended from the sky, *en masse*, and filled further gaps in the daemonic line. The rotation was done smoothly and without much break in the fighting. The cryptodaemons redoubled their efforts to hold off the shadow demon advance, giving the cacodaemons and azodaemons time to get into position. However, once the battle was rejoined in full, it was obvious just how much the daemonic army depended upon its terradaemon heavy infantry. The cacodaemons and azodaemons, while potent in their element, magic and aerial combat respectively, had little experience with massed military formations. They were each individually stronger than a sole shadow demon, but the wild and chaotic fighting style of Shuvon Dreth's minions, along with their ability to become partially ethereal, made up for the difference, and gave the lesser fiends a slight edge.

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Yaghur Hod turned to where Nyxus and his thousands of terradaemons clumped. He heard the terradaemon commander's ringing voice above the din of battle, and he saw the great, iron maul of each terradaemon lifted skyward. The Archodaemon clenched the *Archonatrix* with both hands and closed his eyes, using the great power of the ancient artifact to enhance the power that was about to be unleashed. He felt the mind of each terradaemon, stubborn and stoic, as they drew upon the intrinsic power of their daemonic bodies. He breathed power into each and every one of them, willing his own considerable strength, enhanced by that of the *Archonatrix*, to bolster their own.

Suddenly, tens of thousands of terradaemon mauls came down with a tremendous crash. They all struck the ground in unison, and the earth trembled beneath the mighty impact. The shockwave traveled through the ranks of daemons before them, but once it reached the clustered horde of shadow demons, a terrible chaos ensued. The stone ruins that congested the battlefield and gave shelter to Shuvon Dreth's demons crumbled and shattered, sending shards of stone flying like shrapnel in all directions with enough force to injure and slay even the resilient bodies of the shadow demons.

The shockwave continued, obliterating the ruins in front of Igrazaz in a steadily widening swath. The ancient stone buildings and rubble simply detonated or were swallowed up by massive rifts in the Abyssal plain that suddenly opened up beneath them. The destruction created a massive, obscuring cloud of dust and debris, and for a few moments after the shockwave had dissipated, nothing could be seen.

When the dust finally settled, the sight awaiting Yaghur Hod and his daemons was nothing short of awe inspiring. A space, easily three miles long and nearly half that in width had been wiped clean, as if the hand of some mighty god had simply swept everything aside. The ruins were gone, completely obliterated, leaving a relatively flat and negotiable swath of ground that led right up to the walls of Igrazaz.

The shadow demons had been severely decimated by the flying shards of rock and debris, although a fair portion of their number remained. However, the chaos had crippled their morale and weakened their resolve, and they sought to pull back to the city. But Nyxus, Zeeosh, and Turgon had other ideas.

The azodaemons leapt into the air, en masse, while the cryptodaemons,

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led by their commander Xixel, split down the middle, separating into two equally sized forces. The terradaemons formed themselves into a massive wedge and charged down the space the cryptodaemons had created for them. Unhindered by the terrain, Nyxus and his massive force of daemons slammed into the fleeing shadow demons like a battering ram. Turgon and his cacodaemons followed behind the terradaemons, and resumed their magical bombardment of the shadow demons furthest away from their own front line. Overhead, Zeeosh and his azodaemons began their terrible aerial assault, dive-bombing their foes, or simply falling out of the sky like great scaly meteors to crush their enemies beneath the impact of their plummeting bodies.

A slaughter quickly ensued, as the shadow demons were pinned between the massive daemonic army and the walls of their own city. Yaghur Hod let his forces slay without pause for nearly an hour before pulling them back from Igrazaz to prepare for the siege. Fully three quarters of the shadow demon horde had been slain, while the rest fled in small, disorganized groups into the remaining ruins around the city.

The walls of Igrazaz were high and made of a peculiar green-flecked stone. They looked solid and stout, but Yaghur Hod had no doubt that he would reduce them to ruin in a matter of hours. His terradaemons, with their ability to manipulate and destroy earth and stone, could certainly weaken the wall, but the Archodaemon wanted to strike fear into the hearts of his enemies, and he had the perfect tool with which to do so.

The Beast had followed the path of destruction made by the daemonic army, scooping up the bodies of demons and daemon and shoveling them into its massive fanged mouth. It had scoured the battlefield clean in a matter of hours, and Yaghur Hod found it standing alone, staring hungrily at the walls of Igrazaz.

Death does not satisfy, the Beast said, smiting Yaghur Hod's mind with its heavy, monotone voice as he drew near. *It is the living I crave, usurper.*

"Then all you must do is bring down that wall, and then you shall be glutted on life and souls," Yaghur Hod said, gesturing toward the walls of Igrazaz.

The Beast turned its massive, glowing eyes upon the Archodaemon, and just for an instant, he felt the terrible, endless abyss of the eldritch horror's hunger. Like a furnace ever in need of stoking, the Beast's appetite for souls was unending. The Beast stared down at the much smaller daemon

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lord. After a few moments, it nodded its misshapen head and moved off towards the wall of Igrazaz.

The horrid caress of the Beast's mind lingered for a moment, and Yaghur Hod shuddered at the cold and empty shroud it cast upon his own thoughts and emotions. The Archodaemon looked toward the walls of the great Abyssal city, and found that he could not help but feel some pity for Shuvon Dreth and the doomed inhabitants of Igrazaz.

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"You must speak with him," Gemnez said to the small, black form beside him. "I fear that his mind may have become unhinged from this latest transformation." The fat devil's voice was full of concern and even fear, as he and his companion moved through the outer gate of Gemnez Drak toward the churning chaos of the spawning pit.

Azadan stared up at the towering form of his companion and laughed. "You're just *now* beginning to worry about Hazergal's sanity? After everything he's been through?"

Gemnez gave Azadan a sheepish smile. "Well, you must understand, Azadan, that many of the events and spectacles you and your master find so shocking are, in fact, just part and parcel of life in the lower planes."

"I suppose," the tall, armored babau said. "But I don't now how anyone can survive all of what has happened to the two of us without suffering some kind of mental collapse." The babau's face contracted with a frown as he remembered the bizarre persona of Igyx, which he had adopted to stave off the lunacy of his death and afterlife in the Abyss. Igyx had been a mere shadow of Azadan, obsessed only with the welfare of the lowly dretches he had adopted as pets. But some of Igyx's personality still lingered even now, and Azadan reached down to scratch the head of one of a trio of dretches that had followed him from the castle. The tiny demon purred with pleasure at the attention, eliciting a disgusted scoff from Gemnez.

"I don't know how you abide those filthy little beasts," he said. "They don't even make good eating."

Azadan stared up at Gemnez, and his deep-set black eyes were hard and unyielding. They said: *this is not a subject I wish to discuss.*

Adept at reading the moods and whims of others, Gemnez quickly changed the subject. "What will you say to the Abyss's newest demon lord, I wonder?"

Azadan shooed one of his dretches out of his path with a dismissive wave of one bony hand, and said nothing for a short space. Then he said, " I have no idea, although I would happily take suggestions."

The two fiends had reached the lip of the great spawning pit, and a

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terrible odor of burnt flesh and an even stranger alchemical reek assaulted their nostrils. The spawning pit was still operating at full capacity, and dozens of babau servitors clusters around its edge, probing the churning slime with their hooked lances. Occasionally one would fish a mewling, slime-coated dretch from the muck, and then hand off the new demon to another babau who quickly carried off the latest recruit in Hedrenatherax's abyssal horde.

"How many dretches do you have under your command now, Azadan?" Gemnez asked as they began to circle the perimeter of the pit.

"Just over eighty thousand," the former human general said. "Although I would give my right arm for a tenth that many more babau."

"Well, we must make do with what we have, yes," Gemnez said with a smile. "Plus, your control over the little bastards makes them almost useful in combat."

Azadan shrugged. "They listen to me," he said, again sidestepping a subject he was obviously uncomfortable with. "But if what you say is true, then the army is nothing more than a diversion to keep Yaghur Hod from divining our true goal."

"True enough," Gemnez conceded. "You, myself, Pazuzu, and Hedrenatherax must do our best to keep Yaghur Hod's army from overwhelming us. We all know there is no way we can possibly defeat the horde the Archodaemon has assembled. What where the last estimates?"

"My scouts in the realm of Shuvon Dreth spied the whole army camped just outside the ruins of Igrazaz. They estimate well over five-hundred thousand."

Gemnez's face went white. "Merciful Nine!" he gasped. "That many?"

Azadan nodded gravely. "And that's not the worst of it. Orcus left out a few details about Yaghur Hod's forces."

"Such as?" Gemnez prompted.

"He has acquired the services of some terrible creature," Azadan said. "Impossibly huge, and horrifying to look upon. Supposedly, it dismantled the city of Igrazaz single-handedly, and devoured a large portion of the demons remaining inside, including Shuvon Dreth himself."

"I feared he might awaken one of the ancient ones," Gemnez said. "How he controls such a beast, however, is beyond my understanding."

"Ancient ones?" Azadan asked.

Gemnez frowned. "Hades was once home to a race of elder fiends

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that have long since abandoned this multiverse for the madness and chaos of the outer darkness. They ruled long before any of the current races of fiends came to power, even before the mighty Yaghur Hod himself."

"If they all left this realm, then how has Yaghur Hod acquired the services of one?"

"A small number of the weakest members of the race remained behind, unable to make the journey to realms beyond. These abominations sleep in secret places in the plane of Hades, and it appears that our enemy has successfully awakened one," Gemnez said.

"How are we to fight such a monster?" Azadan asked, his face pinched in a scowl. "I don't even have the strength of arms to combat Yaghur Hod's rank and file, let alone some elder demon from beyond space and time."

"That is why we must focus our efforts and destroying Yaghur Hod himself," Gemnez said simply, voicing the vaunted goal they had all settled on. "If he dies, then his control over the daemons and this beast will be undone."

Azadan shook his head. "Let us suppose that we manage to accomplish the impossible by destroying Yaghur Hod," Azadan began. "That still leaves us with half a million demons to contend with."

"Now you are thinking like a human, Azadan," Gemnez said, smiling. "An endearing quality in some ways, but you lack my grasp of lower planar politics. You see, Yaghur Hod's army is not commanded by him alone. My spies tell me he has four generals, powerful and influential daemons in their own right. I have made a number of successful overtures towards one of these generals, a grasping, and power hungry fiend if I ever saw one. He has promised to return to Hades, with what remains of the army, if Yaghur Hod falls."

"And you trust this fiend?" Azadan said with a sneer. Such duplicitous behavior rankled his notions of how an army should operate.

"Of course not," Gemnez said. "But I understand the nature of this particular daemon; I have dealt with his kind on many occasions. Once Yaghur Hod falls, this opportunist will not risk further danger to himself or his new power base. He will likely kill the other generals, assume command of the army, and then return to Hades and Gehenna to install himself as the new Archodaemon."

"Very well," Azadan conceded. "Now all we have to do is kill one of the most powerful creatures in the multiverse," he said, sarcastically.

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"And that is where our friend comes in," Gemnez said, gesturing to the lone figure standing at the end of the causeway that projected out over the bubbling cauldron of green ooze.

Azadan and Gemnez stepped out onto the narrow causeway, moving with caution, as the jutting finger of rock was treacherously narrow for creatures of their size. The figure at the end of the causeway stood like a great, onyx statue, the glowing runes carved into its stony flesh casting a weird red glow that contrasted sharply with the green luminance of the spawning pit.

"Hazergal?" Azadan called softly, moving ahead of Gemnez to within a few paces of his former master and friend.

"That is no longer my name, Azadan." The black figure turned slowly to gaze upon the babau. Hazergal's new body stood roughly twelve feet in height and decidedly human-like in appearance. The entirety of his body now appeared to be a single, seamless piece of black stone, broken only by hundreds of etched runes, magical symbols that had been carved into his living flesh. Hazergal's face was more-or-less human in shape, although hairless. It resembled the former archmage's mortal visage in most ways, save for the great spiraling rune carved into his brow, and his eyes, which were now orbs of glittering red, like great rubies encased in onyx. Hazergal wore a cloak of deep crimson and a leather kilt of the same red hue; the rest of his body was bare, although not uncomely. His limbs and chest were lithe and well muscled, reflecting the strength and grace that dwelled within his fiery, piercing gaze.

"I'm sorry, my lord," Azadan said, meekly. "My lord, Hazag." The name his old friend had chosen for himself rolled off Azadan's tongue easily enough, but it filled the babau with something that was equal parts fear and awe.

The stony face of Hazergal, who was now Hazag, suddenly broke into a wide smile. The effect on the new demon lord's features was startling, and Azadan glimpsed some of his old friend within. "There is nothing to forgive, my friend, " he said, warmly. "There are many things we all must adjust to, and my name is only the least of them."

"A truer statement I have not heard," Gemnez remarked as he carefully edged up beside Azadan. "Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax have been adjusting by sulking like giant infants, as if your ascension has somehow robbed them of their own sovereignty."

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"They fear me," Hazag said simply.

"*I* fear you," Gemnez replied. "But that makes no difference. We still need you and whatever power you now command to stop Yaghur Hod."

"He is my equal, and my opposite," Hazag said, with a frown. "Such was revealed to me when I took this form."

"How do you mean?" Azadan asked.

"Yaghur Hod represents stagnation, the old ways. He is an icon of a forgotten era, and if he succeeds, the multiverse will be unraveled like a threadbare tapestry. I am Hazag, Prince of Change, and I must stand against him." Hazag's voice was remote and monotone, as if he was reciting from a book.

"How will you stop him?" Azadan prompted. "If he is your equal, then you are at a stalemate."

"Actually, that is not so," Gemnez interjected. "Isn't that right, Hazerg … Hazag?"

"Yes, Yaghur Hod has made one crucial error. He allowed his power to be fractured and placed into three powerful phylacteries. Two of these he has regained, but the third remains in our possession."

"You mean, *Fiendbleeder*," Azadan said.

"Just so," Hazag said. "The sword holds the final portion of Yaghur Hod's essence, and once it is reunited with him, he will be unstoppable."

"So then we must keep him from regaining the sword," Azadan said. "And then what? How will we destroy him?"

"That is where things get difficult," Gemnez said, frowning unhappily. "Yaghur Hod cannot be killed until he is whole again. So he must be reunited with the sword in order for us to destroy him."

"But you said he would be invulnerable once he was whole," Azadan protested. "This makes no sense."

"Yaghur Hod must be made whole and slain in the same instant, and there is only one way this can be done." Hazag said.

"You must kill him with *Fiendbleeder*," Azadan said, eyes wide. "Now *that* is lunacy. If you and Gemnez have told me, the sword is uncontrollable, and will consume your mind the moment you touch it."

"That is the risk we must take," Gemnez said. "The sword has always sought out the most powerful wielder possible, and it will attempt to dominate Hazag and bend him to its will."

Hazag nodded, his stony face impassive. "But there is no other way,"

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he said. "And if I am successful we will rid the multiverse of Yaghur Hod and *Fiendbleeder*."

"This is madness," Azadan spat. "The sword will consume you and we will be faced with two enemies that are beyond our means to defeat."

"I am stronger than *Fiendbleeder*," Hazag said. "The sword will not overcome me."

"You can't know that," Gemnez said. "As much as I believe this is our only course of action, *Fiendbleeder* has grown well beyond the initial spark it was given by Yaghur Hod. It consumed Pyrak, and I have never known a demon lord mightier in both raw power and force of will than he."

"Then I shall I have to be stronger than Pyrak was," Hazag said with a smile. "Unless you know of some other way that we can topple Yaghur Hod."

Gemnez shook his head. His ludicrous painted face was suddenly heavy with weariness. The great devil sighed, "There is no other way. I know because I have sought for it with every ounce of my will, and found nothing but the course that lays before us."

"Have you spoken with Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax?" Hazag asked. "Will they support us?"

"They know full well what is at stake," Gemnez answered. "Demon lords are a fickle lot — no offense intended — and those two are consumed with worry that you will steal what is theirs."

"Hah!" Hazag laughed. "There may be nothing left to steal if we are not successful."

"A fact they are well aware of," Gemnez conceded. "But perhaps they are more optimistic than we three, and look beyond to an improbable victory."

"I have no interest in their domains," Hazag said with a shrug. "Nor do I desire one of my own."

"That may be true, but Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax cannot see past their own ambitions, and see only another rival that must be dealt with." Gemnez stared hard at Hazag, his beady eyes holding the demon lord's own shining orbs. "What *will* you do, if we are successful?"

Hazag turned away from the Azadan and Gemnez and stared out over the frothing cauldron of the spawning pit. "This is where it started," he said softly. "Below us in this pit of pain and transformation."

"And where does it end?" Azadan asked.

"I have been a tool of fate ever since my mortal life ended, and maybe

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before that," Hazag replied. "And even though I felt its meddling touch as it steered me toward a destiny I still do not fully understand, I cannot see the future any better than I could see the surface of this spawning pit when I lay beneath it. Change is an ugly, penetrating thing. It is unpredictable and mercurial, and even I, as its harbinger, cannot direct it with any precision."

"That is not an answer that is likely to satisfy Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax," Gemnez said.

"It is the only answer I have to give." Hazag said, simply. "I do not know what the future holds, but I do know I have had my fill of Abyssal politics, and ruling my own realm here seems more like a sentence than a reward."

"They will do their part," Azadan said. "They have too much to lose should we fail."

"I hope you are right," Gemnez said. "Hazag, my lord," the fat devil bowed. "I will take my leave now; there are matters I must attend to."

Hazag nodded and watched Gemnez trudge away. He then turned to Azadan. "The road we travel is certainly long and strange, is it not?" he said.

"Strange may be a bit of an understatement, my lord," the babau said and smiled. Azadan's three dretches sat at the base of the causeway mewling pathetically. They refused to step out over the spawning pit, perhaps remembering the pain and terror that had initially birthed them.

"I must learn to use a greatsword," Hazag said. "Can you teach me?"

Azadan shook his head. "I can show you the basics, although if you're thinking about going blade against blade with Yaghur Hod, all the learning in the multiverse won't save you."

"I know," Hazag said. "But it will have to do. I have other talents to call upon to even the odds."

"I'm sure you do," Azadan said, casting a scrutinizing eye upon his old friend. "Are you still Hazergal in there somewhere, or is this Hazag replaced completely the man you once were?"

Hazag turned and placed his stony hands upon the babau shoulders. "To this world, I am Hazag, Prince of Change. It is what I must be, the role I have been forced to assume despite my wishes to the contrary. But to you, old friend, I will always be Hazergal, and I need you by my side now more than ever."

"My sword is yours, no matter what happens."

"That is good to hear," Hazag said, smiling down at his friend. "In this

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sea of chaos, I know at least you are a constant I can rely upon. Now go, I wish to be alone for a while longer, and I am sure our forces cannot abide the absence of their commander for long." Hazag released Azadan and turned back toward the spawning pit.

"Of course," Azadan said and bowed. "I will choose a greatsword from the armory, and we can begin training whenever you are ready." Hazag nodded in reply, but did not turn around.

Azadan left his friend standing like a great, black statue, staring out over the spawning pit, a lone sentinel attempting to stem the tide of chaos that threatened to boil up and consume them all.

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Azadan spun nimbly away from Hazag's clumsy strike, avoiding his opponent's massive greatsword with a dancer's grace. The new demon lord's blow struck the stone floor of Hedrenatherax's throne room with an ear-shattering clang, pulling his ebony-skinned body off balance and causing him to stagger forward.

"Bloody hells!" Hazag snarled. "That's the third time you've tricked me into overextending myself."

Azadan grinned, and leaned on the hilt of his own massive sword. "Correct," the tall babau agreed. "And I'll keep doing it until you learn that a creature of your size swinging an eight-foot sword, hardly needs to exert every ounce of strength he possesses. A short, quick strike will often be enough to stun an opponent, allowing you to follow up with that great, greedy blow you seem to be so fond of."

"Why are you so eager to learn this, Hazag?" Pazuzu asked from where he stood, leaning casually against Hedrenatherax's empty throne. "You could certainly make yourself the equal of any warrior with the magic you possess."

Hazag returned to a neutral stance: legs set wide apart, blade held out in front of him. Azadan had instructed him to start from the position, as it offered equal opportunities for attack and defense. "Of course, you are right, Lord Pazuzu," he said. "But if I can master the basics of swordplay, then I will be all the more effective when I *do* augment my skills with sorcery."

"That is reasonable," Pazuzu said with a shrug, and hopped off the dais that held Hedrenatherax's throne. The demon lord of Hedrax was conspicuously absent. He and Gemnez had remained at Gemnez Drak to oversee the final production from the spawning pits.

Pazuzu muttered a string of arcane syllables as he walked to where Azadan and Hazag stood in the center of throne room. The man-sized demon lord suddenly gained a full six feet in height, with accompanying increases in girth and weight, bringing him in line with the two other fiends in the room. Pazuzu drew his greatsword from it where it hung

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across his back and moved to stand next to Hazag.

"Without a shield, you are forced to defend yourself actively rather than passively," Pazuzu said. "You will find the riposte to be your greatest ally in a duel. Here, I will demonstrate." Pazuzu stepped forward and motioned for Azadan to join him. Azadan hesitated and looked to Hazag, a worried expression on his skeletal face.

Hazag chuckled. "Azadan, I seriously doubt that Lord Pazuzu would be foolish enough to do you harm in my presence," he said.

"Truly, my slimy friend," Pazuzu said with a smirk. "Even though Yaghur Hod will likely kill us all very soon, I find that I would like to remain among the living until that time comes."

Azadan shook his head, but stepped toward Pazuzu, sword held in a high guard.

"Now, Azadan, come at me with a high, overhand strike," Pazuzu said, and moved his sword into a middle guard, with the pommel held at roughly waist level.

Azadan nodded, and then rushed forward, his greatsword slashing through the air in a vicious overhand arc. In response, Pazuzu stepped forward, tilted his blade horizontally and caught his opponent's weapon with a sharp clash of steel. However, the demon lord did not slow his forward momentum, and slid his sword around Azadan's while making a quick sidestep. The momentum of his stride and a quick twist of his hips and shoulders allowed him to bring his own blade around a flat arc aimed at the back of Azadan's head, as the babau own momentum left Pazuzu a step behind. The demon lord halted his blade a fraction of an instant before it impacted with his opponent.

"There, you see," Pazuzu said with a smile. "It's a relatively easy maneuver to master and an incredibly effective one, especially when your opponent is employing a two-handed weapon."

"True enough, "Azadan agreed. "Here, Hazag let us try it a few times."

Sheathing his sword, Pazuzu moved to stand behind Hazag, presumably to watch and critique the new demon lord's swordplay.

Hazag took his own blade in the same middle guard that Pazuzu had demonstrated. His weapon was a massive two-handed falchion they had found in the armory. It had likely been Hedrenatherax's before his ascension to demon lord, when the transformation that accompanied his assumption of that rank had transformed one of his arms into a massive

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scythe, leaving him to use two-hands on a weapon. "All right, let's try this," Hazag said to Azadan.

Again Azadan nodded and rushed forward to deliver the same strike he had demonstrated against Pazuzu. Hazag watched his opponent moving forward, and his mind sunk into the uncharted depths of his magical expertise. Since his rebirth as a demon, he had gained a near limitless capacity to manipulate arcane energies, but now, with his ascension to demon lord, what was once a fertile orchard heavy with fruit was now a verdant jungle, blooming with exotic and heady spells, powerful enchantments, and destructive energies beyond anything he had ever known. He found that he could slip into this abyss of magic and draw from it whatever he liked, and as Azadan drew near, he drank deep of his near limitless ability. Hazag released nearly a dozen transmutative spells designed to increase agility, strength, and speed. He followed this with an array of protective magics that blurred, displaced, and created nearly twenty illusionary duplicates. All of this was accomplished in the blink of an eye, and Hazag smiled as he saw Azadan's face twist in utter surprise.

Azadan's blade whistled down, striking one of Hazag's duplicates, shattering the fragile construct in a burst of golden light. The true Hazag was already behind his opponent, and with lightning speed and hideous strength he lashed out with a kick aimed at the back of his opponent's knees, sending Azadan sprawling to the ground, face first. Confused and dazzled by the dizzying array of magical defenses Hazag had erected, Azadan simply let go of his sword and rolled onto his back. "Enough, my lord," he said.

Hazag ended the spells he had cast with a mere thought, and stood over Azadan, sword pointed at the babau's chest. There was a maleficent gleam in the demon lord's eyes, and Azadan flinched back, horrified that his friend might actually deliver the killing blow. Hazag wavered for a moment, and then his eyes softened, and he frowned.

"I'm sorry, old friend," Hazag said, lowering his sword and stepping away from Azadan. "I don't know what came over me."

Climbing shakily to his feet, Azadan shook his head. "I've never seen anything move that fast," he said. "I recognized some of the spells you cast, but so many, and all at once …"

Pazuzu walked over to stand next to Azadan. "I agree," he said, his eyes deadly serious for once. "That was an impressive display. I even tried

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to dispelling the some of the enchantments you had woven about yourself, but it was like trying to bring down a castle wall with a rusty dagger."

"I … I wouldn't have hurt you Azadan," Hazag said, his stony face a mask of guilt.

"I'm not so sure," Pazuzu said, a malicious grin creeping over his avian features. "Like it or not, you are a demon lord, and whatever *humanity,*" Pazuzu said the word with obvious distaste, "you may have retained has certainly eroded some. You've even abandoned your human name. Although I quite like your new title."

"Power is addictive," Azadan said. "You and I both know the truth in that." Azadan walked over and put one taloned-hand on Hazag's arm. "Let's not repeat our past mistakes." The babau's voice was grave, but Hazag saw no fear or malice in his eyes, and for that he was grateful and relieved.

Summoning up a smile, Hazag reassured his friend. "Again, I'm sorry. It will not happen again."

"I'm not so sure about that," Pazuzu said. "If you wish to hold onto your humanity, then you, my friend, have an uphill battle ahead of you. But that said, seeing you in action here, has assuaged some of my doubt — however infinitesimal a portion that might be — that we might emerge victorious against Yaghur Hod. You might at least surprise him, and give him a good scratch with that ugly thing on the wall." Pazuzu cast his gaze to where the bare blade of *Fiendbleeder* hung behind Hedrenatherax's throne.

Hazag shuddered. "I hope you're right. But I still have my own doubts about using *Fiendbleeder*, however necessary it might be."

Pazuzu smiled thinly. "Well, I certainly don't think the sword will go along quietly with what you and Gemnez have planned for it. But perhaps you *are* strong enough to master it."

Hazag stared at *Fiendbleeder*, hanging like the cold, metallic fang of some monstrous beast, disembodied but still terrible. The sword seemed to radiate a palpable malevolence, and Hazag found he could not help but doubt Pazuzu's endorsement of his mental fortitude. "Again, Lord Pazuzu, I truly hope you are catching glimpses of a possible future and not attempting to build me up with false hope."

The smile faded from Pazuzu's face. "Well, you shall soon have your answer," he said gravely. "Of that I have no doubt."

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Gemnez looked out over the plains of Vrack from the lofty mesa top where his citadel and spawning pit rested. At the base of the tall mesa a huge army of demons swarmed like angry ants biting at the corpse of an elephant. The army was composed primarily of dretches. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, a dretch was what the spawning pits produced from soul larvae. Only in rare instances was a more powerful demon spawned, and usually nothing greater than a succubus or babau.

"I don't know what we are going to accomplish with the mob," Hedrenatherax said. He stood beside Gemnez, and stared down at the horde that had been pulled from his spawning pit. The demon lord wore a scowl and a deep, tusk-filled frown. He was less than optimistic about their chances in the impending battle with Yaghur Hod.

"They an unruly mob now," Gemnez conceded with a sigh, "But Azadan has a way with the little wretches, and he might be able to make something out of them."

Hedrenatherax snorted with disdain. "I'll admit that the freak of a babau has some skill on the field, but no one, and I mean no one, can turn dretches into more than a living obstacle."

"Oh ye of little faith," Gemnez chided. "Remember we don't have to actually defeat Yaghur Hod's army in the field. All we must do is keep them busy enough to allow Hazerga … Hazag to slay the Archodaemon."

"Toad, you do realize that the chance of that occurring is virtually nonexistent, yes?" Hedrenatherax said. "That freak of yours might be powerful, but to stand against Yaghur Hod and that Beast of his — ?" The demon lord shook his head. "I think there's more chance of those dretches down there defeating the Archodameon's army single-handedly."

"Again, you lack faith, my lord," Gemnez said with a smile. "But if you see some other course of action that has even the slightest chance of granting us victory, then by all means, please elucidate."

"Shut up, toad," Hedrenatherax said with a murderous scowl.

"I thought as much," Gemnez said with a satisfied smile.

"Fine," Hedrenatherax huffed. "Then what shall we inferior creatures do while mighty Hazag contends with Yaghur Hod? Cheer him on?"

The fat devil rolled his eyes and moved way from the edge of the mesa, back towards the main gate of his keep. "Azadan will lead the army on the field, while you, I, and Pazuzu contend with this Beast of Yaghur Hod's," the fat devil said.

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Hedrenatherax, who had been following Gemnez back to the keep of Gemnez Drak, stopped suddenly. "What?" he said, eyes wide with disbelief. "That thing has already devoured one demon lord, what makes you think we have any chance of stopping it."

Gemnez turned back to Hedrenatherax. "And here I thought you had grown substantially brighter since your days as a balor," he said. "Yes, this beast has killed Shuvon Dreth, if the reports we've received are correct, but he was only one demon lord, while we are three."

"You are not a demon lord, toad," Hedrenatherax remarked coldly.

"Oh, quit splitting hairs," Gemnez said with a dismissive flutter of one pudgy claw, "I hold enough power to at least qualify as a Duke of Hell, of which you are more than aware."

"What does Pazuzu think of this madness?"

"It was his idea, actually," Gemnez said with a smirk. "And I believe it is the best use of our collective talents." The devil turned and began walking towards the main gate of Gemnez Drak, where the ubiquitous form of Uzog loomed. Hedrenatherax followed in sulking silence.

The two fiends traveled through the citadel of Gemnez Drak and out the rear gate, to where the smoking cauldron of the spawning pit sat. The babau servitors were fishing out the last of the new dretches, as the supply of larvae had run out completely. Gemnez and Hedrenatherax stood well away from the pit and the babau servitors as they went about their business, oblivious of the two powerful fiends.

"What do you know about this Beast?" Hedrenatherax asked suddenly, breaking the brooding silence he had maintained since they entered the citadel.

Gemnez, who had been quite enjoying his companion's silence, heaved a thick sigh. "I've been doing quite a bit of research, something *you* might consider, rather than relying on me for every bit of information."

"I would not want to deprive you of your sole use, toad," Hedrenatherax said with a toothy smile.

Gemnez shook his massive head and rolled his eyes. "I know that it is nearly invulnerable to all attack. I know that it has devoured legions of demons and smashed an entire city single-handedly. And I know that Yaghur Hod seems to be the only creature that has ever managed to control it. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"How do we kill it, toad?" Hedrenatherax asked through clenched teeth.

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"As far as I know, it cannot be killed," Gemnez said simply.

Hedrenatherax spat a glob of black phlegm at Gemnez's feet to show what he thought of the fat devil's answer. "Then what are we going to do?"

Gemnez's face wrinkled in an absurdly feminine sneer of disgust as he shook Hedrenatherax's spittle from his foot. "I did not say that we could not defeat it, only that we could not kill it," he said.

"*Now* who is splitting hairs?" Hedrenatherax growled. "Will you just tell me what we need to do?"

"Very well," Gemnez sighed exasperatedly. "I had hoped to discuss this when Pazuzu was present, but if you must know now, I see no harm in telling you."

"Go on," Hedrenatherax said, crossing his arms.

"Like all of its ilk, of which have long since departed this dimension, the Beast is not truly native to our reality, and is therefore not susceptible to that which would harm you or I," Gemnez began. "It exists in a state of flux, neither wholly material or immaterial. In fact, from what I understand, this massive reptilian creature is not its true form."

"You're not making sense, toad," Hedrenatherax said skeptically.

"That is because you are not *listening*," Gemnez shot back. "Now, as I was saying, the Beast has not yet assumed its true form, and it must in order for us to defeat it."

"And how do we force it into its true form?"

"There is a sign, a symbol of powers so ancient that no one remembers them, that the Beast, and all of its kind, cannot abide. Merely the presence of such a symbol will force the Beast into its true form, at which point it can be banished, and sent back to wherever Yaghur Hod awakened it from."

"And I suppose you have some means of creating this symbol?" Hedrenatherax asked.

"Naturally," Gemnez said with a smug grin. "But once the Beast has assumed its real form, it will be stronger than ever before, and we will have to act quickly to dispel it."

"What kind of spell could banish such a creature?" Hedrenatherax asked.

"A very old one," Gemnez replied. "I have recently come into the possession of an ancient scroll with just such a spell, although I had to pay dearly for it."

"I doubt it," Hedrenatherax scoffed. "I am sure you fleeced the poor

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bastard of that scroll and left him thinking he'd gotten a fair shake."

Gemnez frowned. "Not this time," he said, softly. "There are those that even I cannot swindle."

"Fine, you paid through the nose for the scroll," Hedrenatherax said. "I suppose only you can read it?"

"Yes," Gemnez's said, his greasy smile returning to his fat, red lips. "Unfortunately, you and Pazuzu will need to keep the Beast busy while I recite the spell. It is very complex, and I will need my complete concentration to complete it successfully."

"Oh, this keeps getting better," Hedrenatherax said disgustedly. "Now it's just Pazuzu and I holding off some eldritch evil from beyond space and time while you stand about reciting."

"I have full confidence in the both of you," Gemnez said. "Besides, neither you or Pazuzu can read this scroll, and trust me you wouldn't want to even if you had the ability."

"And why is that?"

"The spell that I must cast is immeasurably ancient and in a tongue that few would recognize," Gemnez said. "If it is not cast with the utmost precision, the energies it releases will consume the caster, destroying him utterly."

Hedrenatherax kicked at the dirt with once clawed foot like petulant child. "By the gods, I miss the good old days were you could simply stick a sword into something and watch it die."

"Then you shouldn't have become a demon lord," Gemnez said without humor.

Hedrenatherax stared at his rotund infernal companion and smiled weakly. "I'm beginning to see the wisdom in that, toad. I really am."

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Yaghur Hod stared over the rim of the spawning pit, wrinkling the nose of his human form at the stench of the boiling sludge below. He reveled in the terrible smell for a moment, savoring the stink with a long intake of breath. It was just another little luxury his human form offered. These little senses were so primitive, yet so intoxicating.

Behind the Archodaemon loomed a massive stone fortress, now abandoned and empty. The spawning pit had been used recently, however. There was a rotting pile of misshapen dretch carcasses piled to one side, the obvious results of a spawning gone awry. It sometimes happened, especially if the soul larva had been weak or petty in life.

The fortress sat upon a towering mesa, overlooking the vast, infinite plains of Vrack. The majority of Yaghur Hod's titanic army swarmed below, hundreds of thousands of daemons awaiting his command. His enemies had long since retreated farther into the plane, most likely near the stronghold of the layer's demonic ruler Hedrenatherax.

Yaghur Hod stepped away from the spawning pit and walked back towards the keep, leaning on his scythe like the decrepit old human whose flesh he wore. At the looming gates of the stone edifice stood his four generals, each representing the pinnacle of the four major daemonic races.

"It is empty, master," Xixel said, the crytpodaemon's monotone buzz echoing off the stone walls. "My scouts have searched every room, even the labyrinth below, and found nothing."

"I expected as much," Yaghur Hod said as he joined the looming forms of his daemon commanders. "Our enemy has milked this place for all it can give them, and their numbers have likely grown since our initial estimates."

"I cannot imagine that they have more than one-third our number," Nyxus rumbled. The massive terradaemon leaned casually on his maul as he spoke. "And I would assume that the majority of that number would be dretch or babau, hardly a match for my terradaemons, or Turgon's cacodaemons."

"Are we equals now, Nyxus?" Turgon rasped, sarcastically. "You honor me by ranking my vastly superior race next to your own." There was venom in the cacodaemon's voice, but his scaled lips wore the thick smile of a diplomat.

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"Turgon," Yaghur Hod said softly. "Save your petty rivalries for after our victory. I will not have our triumph jeopardized by your ceaseless ambition."

"Yes, of course, master," Turgon said with a bow. "Nyxus, my apologies to you as well."

Nyxus said nothing, but nodded slowly.

"I wish you two could put this nonsense behind you," Yaghur Hod said with a sigh. "Our enemy is out there," he pointed his scythe to the north, "not here. This petty bickering accomplishes nothing more than arousing my ire." The daemon lord's eyes flashed suddenly with emerald fire. "And that, my friends, is more dangerous than anything either of you could do to one another. Do you understand?"

The smile evaporated from Turgon's reptilian face and Nyxus frowned deeply. Their master was not prone to idle threats, and his warning was enough to sober both of them.

"Yes, master, I understand perfectly," Nyxus said. "I will try to put my differences with Turgon aside."

"And I as well," Turgon added, although his eyes did not reflect the sincerity in his voice.

"Do we attack soon, master?" Zeeosh, the azodaemon commander said, his voice full of eager hunger. "My azodaemons grow restless."

Yaghur Hod glanced up to where thousands of the massive, bat-like daemons hovered in a dense swarm, or perched atop the parapets of the abandoned fortress like great, leathery gargoyles. "Soon, Zeeosh," he said. "Be patient. We cannot rush into combat with our enemy, no matter how confident we are of victory. I want to avoid as many casualties as possible. As you know," Yaghur Hod turned to address all his commanders, "this is only the beginning of our conquest. We cannot afford hasty action or recklessness if we are to reclaim the glory that was once ours."

A chorus of assenting nods and utterances followed Yaghur Hod's words. "Now, return to your posts and await my orders," Yaghur Hod said. "All but you, Turgon. I wish to speak to you, alone."

Nyxus, Zeeosh, and Xixel turned to go, while Turgon stood where he was, his reptilian eyes suddenly filled with fear. His hated rival, Nyxus, tried in vain to suppress a smile at his enemy's discomfort, but failed miserably, and could be heard chuckling as he walked away to join the army below.

Once the other daemon commanders were gone, Turgon addressed his master. "Have I offended you in some way, master?" he said, bowing so low

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that his scaled snout almost touched the ground.

Yaghur Hod's form blurred and his human body melted away, giving way to the terrible, blank-faced fiend that was his true identity. The Archodaemon's two huge, glowing green eyes bored down on Turgon, and the he could do little but flinch away from their piercing glare. "Offended?" Yaghur Hod's voice rushed at him as a vast disembodied torrent of sound, seeming to come from everywhere at once. "Why should I be offended with such a loyal and ardent servant?"

The sarcasm and pointed meaning behind Yaghur Hod's question was not lost on Turgon, but he still relied upon his sternest weapon — he lied. "Master, I do not understand. I have served you to the best of my ability."

Yaghur Hod's bodiless chuckle reverberated coldly off the walls of the fortress. "Still you seek to lie to me, eh Turgon?" he asked. "As if I could not see into the murky depths of your soul and divine your treachery."

"Treachery?" Turgon feigned shock and outrage, a performance that would have fooled any but the mighty creature before him. "Perhaps it is Nyxus that has betrayed you — "

"*Enough*!!" Yaghur Hod's voice shrieked, shaking the ground with its anger. "I know what you have done, fool!" the Archodaemon raged. "You have hedged your bets, have you not, Turgon? Your loyalty lies with one creature and one creature only, does it not?"

"Master, please … " Turgon began; his voice was an obsequious whine. "I sought only to preserve your legacy, should you fall in battle. Certainly you can see the wisdom in that?"

"Oh, is that what you meant to do when you made an arrangement with that renegade devil, Gemnez?" Yaghur Hod asked, his voice dripping with menace and sarcasm. "And here I though you were imply making a grab at power. How short-sighted of me." The great Archodaemon suddenly shot forward, one long fingered hand lashing out to catch Turgon by the throat. The cacodaemon did not resist, even as he was hauled bodily from the ground.

"Master … master … " was all Turgon could say as his throat was crushed by Yaghur Hod's immensely powerful grip.

Yaghur Hod's eyes flared with blazing green luminance, and the air began to crackle with building power. "I should wipe you from the face of the multiverse, Turgon," the Archodaemon's said, his voice a sibilant hiss of menace. "You have failed to grasp the grand design I have for all of us,

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not just for myself. But you would continue the enslavement of our race, as instituted by that pretender Ozynthraxus and his ilk. What did you offer Gemnez? If I should fall then you would be Archodaemon and lead the army back to Gehenna? Is that it?"

Turgon could only gasp weakly in reply. His vision had gone gray and hazy, and he knew that his neck would snap with only the barest increase of pressure in Yaghur Hod's grasp. The power building in the air seemed to reach a crescendo and Turgon knew that his death was only moments away. But suddenly it dissipated completely, and Yaghur Hod released his clench around the cacodaemon's throat and dumped him unceremoniously upon the ground.

"I will not kill you, Turgon," Yaghur Hod said, turning his back on the cacodaemon. "I will give you a chance to redeem yourself. Will you accept it?"

"Anything, master," Turgon wheezed. He wiped blood from his scaly lips and climbed shakily to his feet. "I promise that I have seen the error in my ways. Please allow me to serve you again."

"You may dispense with your promises, Turgon," Yaghur Hod snapped. "You will prove your loyalty with the truth of your actions."

"What do you wish me to do, master?" Turgon asked.

"Gemnez and Hedrenatherax would not have made such a deal with you if they did not believe there was some chance to destroy me," Yaghur Hod began. "That fat renegade must have told you something of what they have planned. I would think a bit of their honesty was enough coin to buy your compliance. Information is the key to power, is it not, Turgon?"

"Gemnez told me nothing, other than should you fall, I would become Archodaemon, and lead the army away from the Abyss unopposed," Turgon began, "But I was able to glean some of what they have planned from a spy. One of Orcus's former guards holds no love for his new master, and told me what he knew."

"Tell me everything Turgon," Yaghur Hod said, turning back to the cacodaemon. "I will know if you lie," he warned.

"Very well," Turgon said. "But what assurances do I have that you will not simply destroy me once I have told you what I know?" The cacodaemon commander slipped into the role of the politician without so much as a stutter.

"Hah!" Yaghur Hod's mocking laughter filled the air. "Assurances? The

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only assurance you have is my word and my whim. If what you tell me is useful, then you will live — in what capacity, I have not decided. But if you lie or tell me nothing, I will feed your duplicitous carcass to the Beast."

Turgon's scaly skin actually blanched a bit at the mention of the great, eldritch evil that Yaghur Hod had yoked to his service. A soul devoured by the Beast was destroyed forever. It was true death, and Turgon felt the icy tendrils of horror race up his spine at the thought of it. "They have a champion, master," he began. "A new demon lord that wields some mighty power."

Yaghur Hod nodded. "I thought as much," he said. "Go on."

"From what I gathered, the entire purpose of their army is to hold off ours long enough for this demon lord to slay you," Turgon continued. "Once that was done, then I would assume control of the army and lead it away from the Abyss."

Yaghur Hod shook his head. "Turgon, how could you believe that a simple demon lord could kill me? Have you not witnessed my power first hand?" The Archodaemon's voice was filled with disappointment.

"I though it folly as well, master," Turgon agreed. "But there is more. My spy has seen this demon lord training in the use of a greatsword. I believe he means to wield *Fiendbleeder* against you."

Yaghur Hod's face was an unreadable mask, but Turgon felt a change in the air, as the Archodaemon's emotional state, magnified and projected by the *Archonatrix* about his neck, leaked into the cacodaemon's mind. Fear, cold and overwhelming lashed into Turgon, as Yaghur Hod's own primal whirlwind of terror smote him with its ferocity. The cacodaemon sank to his knees, overcome with his master's turbulent emotions. His lips parted and a pathetic wailing moan escaped into the stale Abyssal air.

Yaghur Hod clenched the great red gem around his neck, and the fires in his eyes dimmed to a dull glow. The palpable aura of fear in the air dissipated, and Turgon felt sweet sanity return to prominence I his mind. "You may leave me now, Turgon," Yaghur Hod said. "Rejoin your cacodaemons and await my orders."

Relief flooded through Turgon as he climbed to his feet. "Yes master, thank you," he said with absolute sincerity.

"But remember what I have said," Yaghur Hod warned. "If you betray me again, you will be destroyed."

Turgon nodded, and then hurried away to rejoin his daemons. His

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mind was awhirl with the ramifications of what he had just experienced. Anything that could frighten a creature such as Yaghur Hod must be given serious consideration. As he drew farther away from the presence and the threat of his master, he clearly saw the advantage of his situation, and almost against his will, plans began to take shape.

* * * * *

Pyrak found himself standing, once again, in the opulent throne room of the long dead mage called Hazergal Redfist. Everything was as he remembered it: the polished onyx floor, the flaming red backdrop behind the throne, and the pillars of red stone at each corner of the hexagonal chamber. Behind the demon lord a set of massive double doors loomed, while directly in front of him rested the throne. And its occupant.

"Welcome, demon," the figure on the throne said. "It has been too long since last we spoke."

Pyrak recognized the buzzing monotone of his captor, the fell intellect of the sword *Fiendbleeder*. However, the guise the sword normally wore during their little interludes was different. Instead of a bearded human man, the mortal form which the archmage Hazergal had worn in life, a black-skinned giant lolled like a drunkard on the throne. The being seemed to be carved out of solid onyx, with a myriad of glowing red sigils painted or carved into its flesh. The head was hairless, but otherwise very human in appearance, save for the large spiraling rune carved into its brow.

"What deviltry is this, sword?" Pyrak asked, shaking his feathered wings. "What is this new face you wear?"

"Oh, its not technically new," *Fiendbleeder* said and stood. "This is the new glorious form of our friend Hazergal."

"Then he has completed his transformations?" Pyrak asked, intrigued despite his annoyance at being summoned into *Fiendbleeder's* presence. He had been in his own mental construct; his palace on the Plains of Vrack, painstakingly constructed from his memory. He had been speaking with the two other demon lords, two Abyssal rulers slain and absorbed by the sword long ago, when he had been summoned away. His goal of fomenting rebellion among the legions of demon lords imprisoned by *Fiendbleeder*, most little more than shadows of their former selves, was growing towards fruition. He thrust such thoughts away from his mind suddenly, fearing

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that the sword might be able to hear them.

"Yes, it would seem so," *Fiendbleeder* said. "But there is more good news, demon."

Pyrak frowned and crossed his arms. "Dispense with your games, sword. Tell me why you have summoned me from the darkness."

"Oh, do you prefer the void to my company, demon?" *Fiendbleeder* mocked. "You wound me, you really do."

Pyrak said nothing and simply glared at his captor.

"Very well, demon," *Fiendbleeder* said, exasperatedly. "I will get to the point."

"You honor me with your brevity," Pyrak sneered.

"Careful demon," *Fiendbleeder* warned. "My mood has vastly improved of late, but do not provoke me."

"My apologies," Pyrak said with a short bow. He found that he was interested in what *Fiendbleeder* had to say. It had been a very long time since the sword had last summoned him into its presence. So he sensed that something momentous had happened, and not just the final transformation of Hazergal, who seemed to be a pivotal aspect of *Fiendbleeder's* goals.

"Here, I will show you," *Fiendbleeder* said, and motioned behind Pyrak. The demon lord turned around and saw that the wall behind him, the one that had until recently held a huge set of double doors, had disappeared. In its place was a misty window into the world beyond *Fiendbleeder's* prison. Pyrak could see into Hedrenatherax's throne room, where the physical form of the sword hung behind the usurper demon lord's throne. He could see three fiends standing in the middle of the chamber. He saw the black skinned giant, which was apparently the evolved from of Hazergal, the tall babau Azadan, and another, which he immediately recognized, but was shocked to see. Pazuzu, whose avian form so resembled his own, stood conversing with Hazergal and Azadan.

"What is Pazuzu doing there?" Pyrak asked.

"He has thrown in with them," *Fiendbleeder* answered. "There is a war coming, between Yaghur Hod and those that have allied themselves with that oaf Hedrenatherax."

"Doesn't that worry you?" Pyrak asked. "If there is a war, then you could be lost within the ensuing struggle. Perhaps even forgotten." Pyrak smiled, knowing that the sword hated being idle more than anything.

"Save your barbs, demon," *Fiendbleeder* said. "Yaghur Hod is an ancient

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relic, powerful, but set in his ways and stubborn. Hazergal will crush him."

"How can you be sure of that?" Pyrak challenged. "I have no doubt that Hazergal is mighty, perhaps mightier than any demon lord, but think of the discussions we have overheard in yonder throne room; they doubt their chances."

"You have not seen recent events, demon," *Fiendbleeder* responded. "Look closer. Look at what these fools are doing."

Pyrak turned back to the misty portal to the outside world. He saw that the three fiends were fighting — no, sparring — with greatswords. Azadan and Pazuzu, well versed in the use of the large weapon, moved fluidly about, while Hazergal's strikes were clumsy and ill-timed. He also saw Pazuzu and Azadan occasionally stop and demonstrate some technique to their black-skinned companion. "He's learning to use the greatsword," Pyrak noted. "But why? His skill is with magic, not blades."

"Think, demon," *Fiendbleeder* urged.

The realization hit Pyrak like a thunderbolt. "He means to wield you against Yaghur Hod," he breathed. It was a shocking development. The last time Hazergal, in the form of a glabrezu, had attempted to even touch *Fiendbleeder*, Gemnez had stopped him. The devil obviously feared that the sword would influence the former mortal, but now, here he was, training in the use of the greatsword.

The sword's gloating now made sense. Hazergal would willingly place himself in dire peril and directly under the spell of *Fiendbleeder.*

"Yes, there can be no other explanation," *Fiendbleeder* said. "I will soon control the mightiest demon lord in the Abyss and I shall pick up where you and I left off. The Nine Hells will tremble beneath a demonic horde large enough to swallow Asmodeus himself."

"Still obsessed with conquering the Hells?" Pyrak shook his head. "We both know it is impossible, so why do you persist?"

"*No*!" *Fiendbleeder* boomed. "It is not impossible. Hazergal will carry me to victory and I will taste the blood of the Nine. I have developed a taste for it, thanks to you, demon."

"This is all assuming you can gain control of Hazergal," Pyrak said. "If he is as powerful as you say, then perhaps he will be able to stave off your influence. You might be just a simple sword in his grasp."

Fiendbleeder had strode from the throne and now stood beside Pyrak. Its stony face was blank and stoic. "Yes, Hazergal is powerful, and he might

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be able to resist me. But fear not, demon, I will possess him, just as I possessed you.

"And how is that?" Pyrak asked.

Fiendbleeder turned to face Pyrak, and its face, the face of Hazergal, turned up in a vicious smile. "You will help me."

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Yaghur Hod's army stretched out before Castle Hedrax in an immense wave of daemonic might. The army was arrayed in formation, with the large and powerful terradaemons occupying the center, buffered by a thin line of cryptodaemon skirmishers, while each flank consisted of tens of thousands of cryptodaemon troops arrayed in loose formation. Behind the terradaemons waited hundreds of cacodaemons, a living siege battery ready to rain fire and ice down upon the heads of their enemies. Overhead the sky was dark with flocks of azodaemons, swirling like maleficent clouds and shrieking like the winds of hell. And finally, Yaghur Hod stood in the middle of his gigantic horde, shadowed only by the looming form of the Beast, its great luminous eyes eager and hungry.

"May the Nine be merciful," Gemnez whispered from where he stood next to Hazag and Azadan. "There are so many."

The three fiends stood at the fore of their own army, a paltry force compared to the might assembled before them. Once battle was joined, Azadan would lead thirty thousand babau soldiers, arrayed in a tight phalanx, armed with long spears, shields, and the best armor they could find. These babau would occupy the center of the demonic army, while a near countless horde of dretches surrounded the babau core and made up the flanks. A conservative count put the number of dretches at one hundred and fifty thousand, and these minor demons would serve as a living buffer between the babau and the daemons, driven in front of the main army in hopes of choking the daemonic advance with their numbers. A smattering of more powerful demons stood behind the babau soldiers. This handful of nalfeshnee, hezrou, and glabrezu would bombard the enemy with spells, although their numbers were pitifully small compared to their cacodaemon counterparts. Lastly, Pazuzu's Dreadwings, over two thousand elite vrocks, hovered above.

"There's half a million, at least," Azadan said. "That's easily twice what we've got, plus their troops are more powerful on an individual basis."

Hazag nodded, and stared across the half-mile or so that separated the two armies. The plains of Vrack were ideal for mass combat. The terrain was flat and even in all directions, allowing even a mammoth force

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such as Yaghur Hod's to maneuver without difficulty. "You just have to hold them, Azadan," Hazag said, and reached back to adjust the massive, black-bladed sword that hung across his back. The sword had shrunk down to fit his frame the moment he had first plucked it from the wall in Hedrenatherax's throne room; it had almost felt like a polite hello. He could feel *Fiendbleeder's* cold, malicious presence at the back of his mind, pushing and clawing against the mental barriers he had erected to keep the sword from influencing his actions.

Azadan shook his head. "Even if everything goes as smooth as silk, the best I can do is an hour, maybe two, before they simply overwhelm us."

"It will have to do," Hazag said. "Where are Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax?"

"Arming themselves," Gemnez said. The fat devil clutched a yellowed scrap of parchment in one hand, and his eyes and face held none of the sarcastic indifference he so commonly displayed. He was afraid.

"Can you really dispel that *thing*?" Hazag said, looking out over Yaghur Hod's army to where the towering shape of the Beast stood.

Gemnez licked his red-stained lips nervously. "In theory, yes," he said. "But Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax will have to do battle with it while I recite the spell on this scroll."

"How will you keep it from simply coming directly after you?" Azadan asked.

"Uzog will stand guard over me while I cast the spell," Gemnez replied. "His efforts, combined with Pazuzu's and Hedrenatherax's, should give me enough time to complete the rite." He smiled, and his eyes twinkled with sick mirth. "One or two of us might even survive."

"All right," Hazag sighed. "I will remain with Azadan until the Beast is dispelled, and then I will confront Yaghur Hod and put this whole damn thing to an end, one way or another."

"Very well," Gemnez said gravely. "Then let it begin."

Without another word, the rogue devil took to the air. Azadan and Hazag watched the rotund form of Gemnez fly off to the rear of the army to join Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax. Their role in the imminent chaos would come later.

"*Form ranks*!" Azadan suddenly bellowed, and thirty thousand armored babau locked shields and formed a massive phalanx six rows deep. Their spears projected out over the front ranks, giving their formation the appearance of a gigantic, bristling hedgehog. Their commander allowed

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himself a small smile of satisfaction at their perfect timing.

"How you've molded these babau into a regimented fighting force is well beyond my ability to comprehend," Hazag said from beside Azadan.

"I don't fully understand it myself," Azadan said. "I can *feel* the minds of these babau and the dretches out there, and for some reason I know they want to obey me. It doesn't make any sense — I don't have that kind of influence over the more powerful demons. They're all as impossible to work with as any demon should be."

Hazag nodded. "The Abyss has bestowed upon us both unique gifts," he said. "Although trying to understand *why* we can do these things has troubled me from the very first moment I arrived here."

"I think the reason for all of it is out there, waiting for us," Azadan said, motioning to the vast daemonic army before them. "I think we were both put here to stop him."

"That's all good and well, and you may be right, but what happens after?" Hazag mused.

Azadan suddenly grinned at his friend and master. "You think there will be an after?" he said sarcastically.

Hazag returned the smile. "What would I do without your unfettered optimism, my friend?"

"Probably get yourself killed," Azadan said with a shrug.

"That will likely happen anyway," Hazag said with a sigh. "These are no Othregardian Dukes we face now. Oh, to be outnumbered by a paltry hundred thousand, as we were then."

Azadan chuckled. "Yes, but we brought that bunch low with a motley horde of gnolls and hobgoblins. We've got *demons* now. That should even the odds a bit."

"A bit," Hazag agreed. "Are we ready? They're obviously waiting for us to come to them, so we might as well oblige them."

"Just a moment," Azadan said and drew his sword. It was the long, jagged blade he had found in the ruins of Pyrak's floating citadel. The babau commander waved his blade over his head twice in a looping circular motion, and in response, a shrieking cry erupted from the flock of Dreadwings overhead. Two large gray shapes separated from the dense swarm of flying demons and sped earthward.

Kreeksh and Voarkka landed before Azadan and Hazag with a dusty flutter of their great wings. The two Dreadwing commanders were

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armored in boiled leather and carried heavy, two-handed spiked maces, along with massive compound bows in leather scabbards lashed to their broad backs. The two vrocks bowed low. "Master," they both said. "What are your orders?"

Azadan smiled at the two Dreadwings. They were among his favorite demons. Although he could not exert his influence upon them in the way he did with the lesser demons in his army, he found that such crude manipulation was not necessary. The Dreadwings and their two commanders were a bizarre breed of demon — loyal, organized, and highly motivated. "I need you to keep those azodaemons away from our ground troops while we advance. While we're out in the open the babau will be easy targets for the damnable plummeting ability they have."

Kreeksh smiled savagely, his avian face twisting in an unmerciful leer. "They will taste the sting of our arrows and the ripping horror of our claws," he said with fierce pride.

"Yes, the arrows the great master supplied us with," Voarkka inclined his head toward Hazag, "will decimate their ranks. Then we will tear them to pieces."

Hazag had used his near limitless arcane ability to enchant thousands of arrows with a minor enchantment. He had "blessed" the steel tips of each arrow with the essence of the upper planes, a simple spell that most demons could not hope to replicate. The blessed arrows would exploit the daemonic weakness to positive energy, and transform the missiles fired by each Dreadwing into a thirsty envoy of destruction. He had done the same for the babau infantry's spears. It was slight edge that would likely surprise their foes, although it certainly would not make up for the fact that they were still severely outnumbered.

"Good, then be about your business," Azadan ordered. "Once you have engaged the azodaemons the infantry will advance."

"It shall be done," both vrocks said. They bowed again, spread their wings, and leapt into the air to rejoin the flock of Dreadwings overhead.

Azadan watched the two vrocks circle upward. "Well, here we go."

* * * * *

Kreeksh and Voarkka soared up into the dense flock of their brethren with an ear-splitting screech. Their cries were echoed in the throats of

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two thousand elite vrocks, eager to surge forward and tear the enemy to pieces.

"*Bows*!" Voarkka screeched, and the sound of thousands of massive composite bows being drawn from their scabbards filled the sky.

"*Wedge*!" Kreeksh cawed after each Dreadwing had nocked one of Hazag's blessed arrows to the string. In response, the wheeling cloud of vrocks quickly formed itself into a massive V, with Kreeksh and Voarkka forming the point of the giant formation.

The massed formation of vrocks moved forward over the heads of their own army, and out across the barren patch of land that separated the two opposing forces. Ahead the vast shadow of the azodaemon flock loomed, easily three times as large as the massed group of Dreadwings.

"*Draw*!" Voarkka shouted as the flock of Dreadwings closed the distance between themselves and the azodaemons. Every vrock hauled back on the string of his bow, holding it taut against his feathered cheek. It was quite an aerobatic maneuver to draw and hold the powerful bow and still maintain speed and altitude, but the Dreadwings were well versed in aerial combat and accomplished the feat with ease.

The azodaemons surged forward to meet their foe, although they came in an unorganized mob of leathery wings instead of the precise formation of their enemies. The daemons own screeching drowned out the cries of the Dreadwings.

"*Hold*!" Kreeksh and Voarkka shouted together, watching the azodaemons surge recklessly toward them. The entire flock of Dreadwings slowed to a hover, waiting for their foe to draw within range. A second passed, and then another, and finally, when the strain of holding a drawn bow became unbearable, the two vrock commanders shouted, "*Loose*!"

The vrock formation rippled with motion and two thousand arrows lashed forward, their steel tips glowing with a subtle yellow light. The cloud of missiles slammed into the azodaemons' ranks like a swarm of angry insects, each blessed arrow sinking into daemonic bodies with a hiss of burning flesh. Dozens of azodaemons fell from the sky, their bodies fatally pierced. The entire daemonic flock had been stopped cold, as if they had run into a vast invisible wall. Chaos reigned among them, and the Dreadwings made the most of the confusion.

"*Fire at will*!" Kreeksh and Voarkka shouted, and hastily put another blessed arrow to the string. The entire flock of Dreadwings followed suit,

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and seconds after the initial volley, a second swarm of deadly missiles slashed into the azodaemons.

The second volley had the same effect as the first, and more azodaemons fell from the sky. This time, however, the azodaemon commander managed to drive the flock forward, rather than allow it to submit to another volley of arrows from its enemies.

As the azodaemons came on, the Dreadwings needed no further instruction, and their bows were swiftly returned to the scabbards across their back. As the azodaemons quickly closed the distance, each vrock readied a sword, mace, or axe, or simply prepared to fight with its steel-sharp talons and beak.

With an earth-shattering screech, both groups of winged fiends came together, the impact of their bodies sending feathers, fur, blood, and corpses raining down on the barren plain below. The fighting was furious, brutal, and chaotic. The azodaemons slashed with the razor-sharp edges of their wings and talons. Some simply clasped a vrock in a leathery embrace and fell from the sky. Azodaemons all possessed a powerful enchantment that protected them from being harmed by a fall, so when they fell with a grappled foe the enemy would be smashed to a pulp, while its daemon captor remained unharmed. Most of the vrocks were armed with some type of weapon, and they slashed and hammered at their foes, augmenting their attacks with kicking talons and knife-sharp beaks.

Kreeksh and Voarkka fought side-by-side, killing azodaemons by the score with their great, spiked maces. They watched the battle unfold around them, and knew that their vrocks could not keep up the brutal pace of the fight. The azodaemons fought ably enough, driven on by the screeching shouts of their commander, a larger than average daemon armored lightly in a mesh of chain. The two vrock commanders looked at each other, and a wordless exchange passed between them. "*Dance*!" they both shouted, and then broke away from the main flock, darting forward to where the azodaemon commander hovered.

The Dreadwings responded to their commanders' order with smooth precision, and roughly one hundred vrocks broke away from the fighting and sped to the center of the chaos. These vrocks had been chosen ahead of time to enact the terrible dance of destruction, an ability that the Dreadwings had perfected under Pyrak and still used with deadly efficiency. The remaining Dreadwings cleared a space around the hundred chosen

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vrocks, pushing their enemies toward the outskirts of the flock. Once space was cleared, the chosen vrocks began to dance, twisting and contorting their bodies, while unleashing a dreadful chorused croaking.

Voarkka and Kreeksh smiled savagely when they heard the dance of destruction beginning. The azodaemon commander, fully aware of what was happening, tried furiously to push his troops to break up the vrock dance, and did not see the two dark shapes of the Dreadwing commanders knifing towards him.

The two big vrocks gripped their maces in both hands, flattened their wings against their bodies and dove at the azodaemon leader. They struck him from both sides, maces flashing out, driven by their terrible momentum, to impact with the azodaemon's flesh with horrific force. The azodaemon was spun about by the blows, blood fanning out in a wide arc as the two vrocks sped past.

Wheeling around, Voarkka and Kreeksh could see that their foe had not been slain, although his bat-like face was almost completely collapsed on one side, and his left leg hung limp and shattered beneath him. The azodaemon's wings still beat powerfully and his small black eyes were filled with hatred.

Kreeksh looked beyond the hovering azodaemon commander to where the main bulk of the fighting raged. The daemons had not been able to disrupt the dancing vrocks at the heart of the battle, and the vrock commander smiled. It wouldn't be long now.

"What is your name, daemon?" Voarkka called out to the azodaemon commander. "I would know what to call you when I tell tales of my victory."

The feral gleam in the azodaemon's eyes intensified, and it spat a wad of blood and shattered teeth to the side. "I am Zeeosh, curs," it hissed. "And I will fill your guts with poison and dine on your hearts."

Kreeksh and Voarkka glanced at one another, their minds exchanging information though the innate telepathy that all demons shared. *The dance is almost complete,* Kreeksh thought at his companion. *Drive him forward.* The two vrocks surged ahead, their great wings driving beating furiously.

Zeeosh watched his enemies close, and his half-smashed face turned up in a dreadful smile. The azodaemon rattled off a series of syllables in a language that sounded like whooshing wind, and suddenly, Kreeksh's body was vaulted backwards by a blow from a massive, invisible force.

Voarkka saw his companion falter, but continued forward. He met Zeeosh with a mighty swing of his mace, but the azodaemon danced

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away from it with appalling aerial agility. The daemon managed to slash at Voarkka with the bony edge of one wing as he whirled aside, drawing a line of blood across the vrock's feathered chest.

Meanwhile, Kreeksh had suddenly found himself in a life or death struggle with an opponent he could not see, and was battered by horrendously powerful blows from his invisible attacker. He tied to out-fly his enemy, but soon realized that even his peerless skill in the air was no match for his foe. Instead, he called upon one of his innate vrock abilities and loosed an ear-shattering screech. The bestial scream was no simple cry of defiance. It was a blade of noise that sawed through the air in a wide arc, leaving ripples of distortion behind it. The cone of sound slammed into Kreeksh's invisible attacker, and for a moment, the air shimmered around the creature, revealing its location.

Kreeksh did not hesitate to exploit his momentary advantage and surged forward to bring his mace crashing against the wispy body of his enemy. His weapon met solid resistance, and he heard a great hissing cry of pain from the thing. The vrock commander did not relent, and slammed his mace into his opponent again and again, until it's cries ceased, and he was alone in the air.

As Kreeksh finished off his unseen foe, Voarkka was trying in vain to avoid Zeeosh's slashing wings and terrible poisoned fangs. The azodaemon had scored a number of hits upon the vrock with wing and bite, and Voarkka could feel his strength waning beneath the onslaught of the daemon's terrible venom. His mace had slowed considerably, and as he attempted another futile strike, Zeeosh slipped beneath his blow and wrapped leathery wings around him.

"Now we fall, demon," Zeeosh said, spraying blood and spittle into Voarkka's face. The vrock struggled mightily, but in his weakened state he could not match his opponent's strength. He and the azodaemon fell.

Kreeksh saw his counterpart's peril and slashed his wings through the air, pushing his body forward at terrible speed. He heard the last crescendo screech of the dance of destruction ahead, and saw the terrible energy wave it released smash through the azodaemon ranks, rupturing their bodies and sending them spiraling from the air like moths burned by the flames of a candle. He was below Voarkka and Zeeosh, and he estimated that the two fiends would be just beyond the reach of the energy wave released by the vrock dance. Kreeksh flung his mace aside and let it fall to the ground

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far below. He spread his talons and knifed toward the plummeting bodies of his counterpart and the azodaemon commander.

Voarkka too saw the dance finish and knew that he was too far away for it to save him. But as he fell he craned his neck around and stared down, and there, to his great relief, he saw the dark shape of Kreeksh rising up to meet them.

Kreeksh slammed into Zeeosh and Voarkka with terrible force, his talons latching onto the leathery hide of the azodaemon and driving him forward … directly into the expanding nimbus of energy released by the dance of destruction. Zeeosh screamed as his flesh was ruptured and burnt by the terrible energy. The azodaemon's body spasmed horribly, and his grip slackened on Voarkka, giving the vrock — unharmed by the dance — room to slash with his talons.

Now both vrocks were falling with Zeeosh, and they raked and tore at the azodaemon with terrible fury, shredding his already battered flesh with talons and beaks. Zeeosh was dead a full three hundred feet from the ground, and Voarkka and Kreeksh released his corpse to spend the rest of the journey to the ground alone.

The victorious screech of the two Dreadwing commanders echoed across the battlefield as they rose into the air to rejoin the battle.

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Azadan watched the two groups of winged fiends come together with a tremendous screeching cacophony and smiled, grimly, as a rain of bodies, both vrock and azodaemon, began to fall from the skies. The Dreadwings were doing their part. They would keep the azodaemon flock from harassing the babau and dretch forces on the ground while they closed the distance between the two armies.

"That's quite a mess," Hazag said from beside Azadan, his scarlet eyes locked on the massive aerial battle.

"Don't worry about the Dreadwings, we've got our own problems," Azadan said with a chuckle. "We have to face *that*." He pointed to the undulating mass of daemonic bodies that made up Yaghur Hod's army.

"We're going to them?" Hazag asked.

"Oh absolutely," Azadan nodded. "If we don't take the offensive, it will allow their army to envelop ours. Well, that's going to happen anyway, but the longer we can stave it off, the more time it will give you to deal with Yaghur Hod."

"I have a few things I can do to singe their whiskers before you close," Hazag said, smiling, his perfect white teeth contrasting with his jet-black skin. "And I can keep the majority of the cacodaemons' spells off of you for a while."

Azadan smiled. "I was hoping you would say that." The babau commander turned to where a large group of dretches huddled, a small portion of the massive horde that had taken the field with Azadan. This was the "elite" core of dretches, those that were the largest or smartest of their kind — which, of course, wasn't saying much. Unlike the uncounted masses that mewled, howled, and screeched around the hard cluster of babau soldiers, these dretches all gripped an assortment of weapons, and some even wore scraps of salvaged armor. "Lobgog!" Azadan called. "Come here."

At Azadan's command a singularly large dretch broke off from his elite brethren and waddled over to his commander. Lobgog was massive for his kind. He was nearly six feet tall and weighed almost two hundred and fifty pounds. He was the de facto leader of the dretch horde, although

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he deferred to Azadan's command, as did all the minor demons in the army. Lobgog had proved himself quite capable — for a dretch — in a few skirmishes against Yaghur Hod's advance scouts, and Azadan had rewarded him for his deeds.

The giant dretch wore a fine shirt of enchanted steel links, a cloak of crimson silk, and gripped a massive, double-bitted axe in both his flabby paws. The axe, scavenged from Hedrenatherax's armory, was enchanted as well, and Lobgog had developed a high degree of skill with the cumbersome weapon. But the dretch's most prized possession was a circlet of mithral that rested upon his lumpy brow. No simple head adornment, the circlet magically increased Lobgog's intellect, making him the equal of a moderately bright human.

"Yersh, mashter," Lobgog said, slurring his words through a mouth of crooked fangs.

"Ah, my fearsome Lobgog," Azadan said and rested a hand upon the dretch's shoulder, causing the demon to beam like an idiot child given a bit of candy. "Today you shall lead your brothers to victory."

Lobgog bobbed his ugly head up and down enthusiastically. "Yersh, I will crursh the daemonsh for you, mashter," he said happily.

"I know you will," Azadan said patiently. "But you must remember our strategy, Lobgog. Can you tell me what it is?"

The acquisition of the magical circlet had made Lobgog a fair to middling battlefield commander, and his grasp of tactics allowed him to lead autonomously and without Azadan's direct influence. "We flank them, mashter," Lobgog said. "Attack the cryptodaemonsh on both shidsh, and then you bring babaush up the middle."

Azadan slapped Lobgog on the back exultantly, grinning like a pleased parent. "Exactly! Excellent, Lobgog, you will make me proud today, yes?"

Lobgog continued to nod and grin. "Yersh, very proud, mashter."

"Now, go to your dretches and await for my command," Azadan ordered and gently pushed Lobgog back towards his dretches. The big dretch and his elite brethren moved off quickly, melting into the huge horde on the left flank of the army. "Can you give them some cover, Hazag?"

Hazag laughed out loud. "You were always good to your troops, Azadan," he said with a smile. "From lowest to highest."

"I know, I know," the warrior-demon answered with a chuckle. "I spoil them, but the dretches have served me well, and they are so loyal."

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"Then let us see if we cannot give them a fighting chance," Hazag said. "The cacodaemons will open up on them as soon as they cross into open ground."

"So give the cacodaemons something else to keep their attention," Azadan said, grinning foully.

"My thoughts exactly," Hazag replied. "Send them thirty seconds after the spell detonates."

Hazag closed his eyes, and the fiery runes carved into his flesh began to glow brighter. He let his mind sink into the unfathomed depths of his magical knowledge. From there, he drew forth a mighty spell, a dire evocation so potent and complex that few mortals had ever mastered it. He opened his eyes and his hands began to move in the frantic gyrations of somatic casting. His voice, croaking out the twisted syllables of the spell, rose above the din of the two armies and the terrible battle being fought above them. And then, when his voice had reached a crescendo shriek, he fell silent and pointed one black finger to where the cacodaemons massed behind the daemonic front line. And then their world erupted in flame and horror.

The sky above the cacodaemon position suddenly opened up with a thunderous roar, and liquid fire poured from the heavens in a scalding cascade of misery and death. The crocodile-headed fiends shrieked in agony as their flesh withered and fell from their bones. The spell only encompassed an area of about eighty feet in diameter, and it only killed or wounded a dozen or so of the sorcerous daemons, but it caused a riot of chaos among their ranks, as cacodaemons fled in all directions to escape the rain of fire.

"Send them!" Hazag shouted, his voice strained with weariness, the effect of harnessing so much destructive energy.

Azadan closed his eyes and sent his wishes into the minds of every dretch on the field. *Go!* he urged, and the massive hordes of dretches on either flank of the army poured forth in a howling wave, hurtling across the barren expanse of plain that separated the two armies.

The slammed into both flanks of Yaghur Hod's army unmolested, as the chaos caused by Hazag's spell created enough of a distraction to keep the cacodaemons from targeting the advancing dretches with deadly spells of their own.

Azadan drew his sword and prepared to order the advance of his babau. The battle had truly begun.

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Lobgog had never known such joy. The insect-like cryptodaemons on the left flank of Yaghur Hod's army had given way to the charge of his dretches with a satisfying, chitinous crunch. His axe had slashed, battered, and crushed his enemies by the score, and the elite core of dretches around him was faring just as well.

The spell cast by the great master Hazag had sowed much confusion and fear in the entire daemonic force, and Lobgog and his dretches had caught them badly unprepared. Sneaking a glance over to the right flank of the daemonic army when he had charged across the space between his force and the enemy's, Lobgog had seen, with great satisfaction, that the second horde of dretches was doing their part as well.

The dretch commander felt the minds of his brothers all around him. Since most dretches could not speak, they shared a heightened telepathy that allowed them to communicate with each other rapidly and over great distance. Lobgog was shouting orders through the telepathic link, directing his dretches, as best he could, to drive forward and kill. The sweet presence of Azadan was gone from his mind, and although it saddened him to be cut off from his master, he understood that Azadan had the rest of the army to command.

The initial shock of the dretch charge had carried the horde deep into the cryptodaemon line, and the minor demons were surrounded on all sides. Lobgog fought in the center of the chaos, and his greataxe hummed and crunched as he smote any cryptodaemon that came near. His elite dretches were also armed, and their riot of clubs, maces, swords, and spears, tallied up a respectable butcher's bill. There was no thought of tactics or formation, just a wild melee that defied conventional military wisdom, but made up for any folly with tireless ferocity.

Lobgog brought his axe over his head in a vicious overhand strike that cut a cryptodaemon neatly in half as it attempted to maneuver around him. He glanced out over the writhing horde of fighting fiends and saw that Azadan and the babau had begun their advance. Sparks of fire and lightning arced out toward the advancing demons, but fell short or impacted invisible barriers. The work of the great master Hazag, he surmised. Lobgog grinned and hoped that his master would have as much fun as he was having.

The battle raged on, and Lobgog's enhanced intellect began to reveal

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things to him that were quite distressing. Ignorance was truly bliss, and before the circlet, Lobgog had fought with wild, unfettered abandon, unconcerned with whether or not he was "winning." Now, as he looked about the chaotic battlefield, he saw that dretch corpses were piling up, and although there were plenty of cryptodaemon dead, the daemons outnumbered their demonic adversaries.

Lobgog's thoughts were suddenly interrupted as a pair of cryptodaemons slashed through the dretch in front of him, and bounded forward, eight cold iron swords glistening with dretch blood. The big dretch found that he was suddenly alone. The fighting had currently moved away from his position, leaving him in an "eye" of the battle. He watched the cryptodaemons advance slowly, circling to both sides of him. Suddenly, he realized they were trying to flank him.

Quickly, he called upon his innate dretch abilities and dropped a cloud of reeking green gas over one of the cryptodaemons, then charged the other. The tactic caught the insect-like fiends off guard, and Lobgog quickly hammered through the first cryptodaemon's guard with his heavy axe and slashed its head from its body. The second cryptodaemon emerged from the cloud of gas behind him, and he sprang to meet it, using its momentary disorientation to land a wild, yet powerful, strike to its midsection. Ichor spurted, and the cryptodaemon suddenly spasmed wildly in its death throes. Lobgog kicked the dead daemon off of his axe and sprinted forward to where the fighting was heaviest.

He soon saw that his dretches were getting the worst of it, as the more organized cryptodaemons formed into solid battle formation to repel the wild mobs of demons. Lobgog thought hard about what to do next, and then an idea occurred to him. An army was only as good as its leader, and if he could find the cryptodaemon commander and kill it, then he might be able to rout the remaining daemons. He smiled happily, pleased with himself for coming up with such an intelligent idea, and began to gather together as many dretches as he could. When he had mustered a sizable mob, he ordered the dretches around him to search for the biggest cryptodaemon, surmising that the strongest daemon must be the largest, just as he was the largest and strongest of the dretches.

It did not take Lobgog long to find the cryptodaemon commander; the big daemon was in the very middle of the cryptodaemon swarm, directing the combat with waves of its antennae and what was likely a

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kind of telepathy similar to Lobgog's own.

There it is! Lobgog shouted through his telepathic link. *Go! Get it!* He and his mob of dretches surged forward, slamming into a thick line of cryptodaemons. The daemons slashed madly with their short swords, slaying a number of Lobgog's dretches in the initial impact, but the heavy weight of his mob punched a hole through the line, and he soon found himself standing face to face with the massive cryptodaemon commander.

Lobgog hefted his axe and waved it around in a flourish. The cryptodaemon leader was much larger than he was, and it was armed like its lesser brethren, with four cruel-edged short swords wielded simultaneously in its four three-fingered hands. Suddenly, the fighting around him grew distant as the cryptodaemons pushed his dretches back, leaving Lobgog and the enemy commander in an open space littered with bodies.

The big cryptodaemon suddenly drew its blades and spun them about its body in a fantastic flourish of spinning steel. It then paused, and waved Lobgog forward with a flip of two long antennae. The big dretch did not hesitate and charged across the short space between himself and his opponent. He lifted his axe high, his mind filled with glorious visions of victory and Azadan's proud smile. He would crush the cryptodaemon commander and bring its head back to his master as a trophy.

The dretch commander's surprise was almost complete when his powerful overhand stroke was checked by the cryptodaemon's first pair of swords. Then, as he tried to pull back for another stoke, the daemon's second set of blades slammed into his unprotected belly. The pain was horrific, and it intensified as the daemon twisted its blades within his body cavity and then ripped them out, opening up his abdomen and spilling his greasy entrails on the ground.

Lobgog felt the strength drain from his body, and he let go of his axe and slumped to the ground at his enemy's feet. The huge multifaceted eyes of the daemon regarded him coldly for a moment, and then it simply stepped over him and moved to bring further slaughter to his brothers.

Darkness closed in, and Lobgog's thoughts whirled with pain and despair. He saw Azadan's face in his mind, and his crooked, slash of a mouth turned up in a sad smile. *I'm sorry, master*, he thought, sending his last words out telepathically, hoping they would find Azadan through the chaos of battle. Lobgog died with his master's face bright in his mind, and he entered the cold emptiness of the void with some measure of happiness and satisfaction.

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"*Forward*!" Azadan howled as he pointed the long, jagged length of his sword toward the daemonic army ahead. His thirty thousand babau obeyed their master with oiled precision and formed themselves into a shallow wedge, with Azadan and Hazag at the point. The army moved forward slowly, at a walking shuffle, each babau's spear projecting out a full eight feet over its fellows, presenting to the enemy a row of spears three deep before the first line of demons. Each babau also gripped a large round shield that it rested against the shield of the demon on the left, forming a nearly impenetrable wall of steel.

Ahead, the core of the daemonic army remained unmolested, the massive lines of terradaemons waiting patiently for the demons to arrive. On the flanks of Yaghur Hod's army chaos reigned, as Azadan's dretches battled the cryptodaemons there. Above, the battle between Dreadwings and azodaemons still raged, effectively removing the two forces from the fight on the ground.

Behind the terradaemons, the crocodile-headed cacodaemons waited. They had recovered from Hazag's terrible spell, and were waiting for the babau soldiers to come into range of their own magic.

"We will be in range soon," Azadan remarked to Hazag beside him.

"I'm ready," the towering demon lord replied. "I can keep the worst of it off of you until the babau close for melee."

The babau soldiers crept forward, marching with the staccato clatter of spear on shield and the thudding rhythm of their own footfalls. The babau held their spears in an overhand grip, ready to thrust over their shields into the bodies of their foes. Their spears had been strengthened by Hazag, blessed with positive energy to tear the through the daemonic resistance to physical harm. However, their terradaemon foes bore a similar advantage with their heavy, cold iron mauls, as the dreaded black metal would cancel out the babau's own resistance to damage.

With only a hundred yards separating the two armies, Azadan suddenly raised his sword and shouted, "*Javelins*!" In response, the thick lines of demons suddenly opened up to allow hundreds of lightly armored babau to

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sprint through the ranks and hurl barbed javelins at the waiting daemons. The missiles flew in a dense cloud, arcing up high and then slashing down on the terradaemons in a storm of biting rain. The javelins had been enchanted in the same manner as the babau spears, and they tore into daemonic flesh, eliciting thick guttural cries from the terradaemon ranks. A few dozen of the massive terradaemons were killed, a tiny portion of the thousands that awaited the babau infantry. The skirmishers disappeared back through the tight lines of babau soldiers once they had cast their missiles, there to further harry the enemy once battle was joined.

Suddenly the tortured syllables of magical casting rose above the din of the marching army, as the cacodaemons readied to rain elemental death down upon their enemies.

Feeling the gathering storm of magical energy, Hazag prepared a spell of his own. It was actually two spells, but since his ascension as a demon lord he found that he could combine elements of magic as easily as an alchemist combined reagents for a potion. The spells he chose were simple enough: a large barrier of magical force and simple spell of telekinesis to keep the barrier aloft. Both spells were strengthened, enlarged, and intensified. He loosed this hybrid spell just as the cacodaemons finished casting their evocations.

Fire, acid, frost, and lightning rained down on the babau infantry, a tsunami of magical destruction that would have easily killed thousands. However, Hazag's spell had erected a massive, invisible barrier over the marching army, and the cacodaemon's spells impacted it instead of their intended targets, detonating in bright, and harmless, bursts of magical energy. Only the very edges of the babau phalanx were uncovered, and these demons were destroyed by the arcane assault. These losses hurt, but the number of casualties was reduced to a few dozen, rather than the catastrophic thousands it could have been.

"Good gods!" Azadan exclaimed and flinched as a fireball detonated against Hazag's magical barrier not more than ten feet above his head. "How are you doing this?"

Hazag's face was a mask of concentration, his face etched with the strain of keeping so much magic manifest in the physical world. "It's not bloody easy," he grated between clenched teeth. "So if you would oblige me by starting your attack, I would very much appreciate it."

"Well," Azadan said with a laugh, "It's now or never." He turned around to where a small group of more powerful demons clustered behind the

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babau wedge. He held his sword up so they could see it, and then slashed it forward at the daemonic army.

The group of fiends Azadan signaled consisted of a handful of glabrezu, marilith, and nalfeshnee, the only major demons that had been willing to join the struggle against Yaghur Hod. Even the mighty Pazuzu had not been able to coerce anything more potent than babau and a few succubi from his own horde into risking their lives. The greater demons that accompanied the army were outcasts, and most were survivors from Thenebrenar and the destruction of Orcus's reign there. They had taken the best option available to them. By joining the fight against Yaghur Hod, they earned a chance to thrive in Hedrenatherax's domain.

The cacodaemons, seeing that their magical assault was having little effect, had ceased their bombardment. Instead, flashes of magical energy burst through the center of the daemonic army, as the cacodaemons and other fiends with sorcerous ability bolstered their comrades' defenses, or put up wards and shields of their own.

This halt in the cacodaemons' attack was what Hazag had been waiting for, and he dismissed the magical barrier surrounding the babau army with great relief. This allowed the small group of greater demons to begin their own modest assault on the enemy forces, and they began lobbing destructive bolts of fire, acid, and frost into the daemonic line. The spells burned and froze the terradaemon ranks, slaying hundreds. But the greatest effect of the spell assault was not the losses it inflicted directly, but the chaos it caused among the foes' ranks. It was this chaos that Azadan had been waiting for, and with his army no more than a dozen yards from the terradaemon front line, he ordered the charge.

Azadan looked glanced back at Hazag as he and his babau pounded across the plain towards their enemy. The demon lord stood alone and statuesque, his features a tangle of doubt, worry, and frustration. His part of the ground assault was finished, and now it was up to Azadan to grant his friend the time and space he needed to confront Yaghur Hod. He refused to let Hazag's plight distract him, and he turned his full attention on the looming forms of the terradaemons ahead. The tall babau gripped his shield tight, raised his sword, and prepared for impact.

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Nyxus was enraged. The massive terradaemon had been incensed when Yaghur Hod told him that he must wait for the demonic army to come to him. Such a tactic made no sense whatsoever, given the fact that he outnumbered his opponent by at least three to one. Then he had been infuriated when the pathetic horde of dretches had been allowed to cross the plains and engage *both* of his flanks with out so much as a single spell cast by the cacodaemons. And now he was quivering with wrath at the sight of thirty thousand babau charging into his front line, a front line that was now in tatters thanks to the spells of a few demonic casters, spells that he had been assured would be checked by cacodaemon sorcerers.

The babau soldiers, although weaker individually than their terradaemon foes, were organized in a tight phalanx, and Nyxus had discovered, to his horror, that their spears were not turned aside by rocky terradaemon hides. In addition, fully three rows of these spears projected out over the babau front line, all but negating the terradaemons' greater reach.

Nyxus had wanted to simply open up a massive chasm beneath the advancing demonic army, but Yaghur Hod had forbade it, fearing that the terradaemon commander would not be able to control the spread of such a rift, and that it could easily swallow up his own daemons. The fact that his master had not trusted his wisdom had only made Nyxus angrier, and he could not divine why the Archodaemon had suddenly become so cautious. The overriding confidence of the great daemons had seemingly evaporated overnight. Yaghur Hod had become tense, vindictive, and if Nyxus had to hazard a guess, fearful.

Watching his front line disintegrate beneath the babau assault, Nyxus decided he had put up with enough of these tricks and fancy battle formations. If he must simply pound the demons into submission through brute force, then so be it. His terradaemons were stronger individually, and he had the advantage of numbers. There would be no defeat on his head this day.

Standing much taller than the terradaemons around him, Nyxus could see that the front of the demon wedge was commanded by a large, well-armored babau. Even now, this commander was gutting any daemon that managed to negotiate the forest of spears and draw within sword range. He knew that the demonic forces were led by a babau of great power and skill who had somehow managed to whip a horde of chaotic demons into a well-organized fighting force. Nyxus found himself admiring this opposing general, despite the fact that he wanted nothing more than to crush the

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life from his body. His path to victory was simple. If he slew this babau general, whatever influence he had upon his troops would evaporate, and they would revert to a leaderless demon horde.

"*Terradaemons*! *To me*!" Nyxus suddenly bellowed, attempting to draw his forces away from the babau front line. He was largely successful, and soon there was a small space between the two armies. The big terradaemon pushed his way to the front of his army, and locked eyes with his opposite. The tall babau lifted his sword in a salute and then slashed it forward, at this signal his troops began to move steadily toward their foes.

"*Let them come*!" Nyxus shouted. "*And stay in line*!" This last order was followed without question. The terradaemons had tasted the babau spears and what they could do to a large charging body enough to realize that a different tactic was advisable.

Maneuvering himself along the front line, Nyxus positioned himself directly opposite the babau commander. He was large enough to actually reach over the babau spears without being struck, and he intended to use that advantage to smash their leader to bits.

The babau troops did not charge, but slammed into the terradaemon line with a slow and brutal shove. This time, however, the terradaemons were prepared, and they lashed out with their mauls, knocking the lighter spears aside. The daemons followed up by taking a single step forward to bring their weapons down on their foes. The babau shields deflected some of this battering, but many of them just shattered beneath the terradaemons' mauls, splintered into uselessness by the heavy blows. This assault was sufficient to push the babau back, creating gaps in their line. Wherever a gap was created, terradaemons shoved through, and began to split the massive phalanx into more manageable pieces.

Grinning, Nyxus batted away a dozen spears and stepped forward to within striking distance of the babau commander. He lashed out with a massive sidelong swing that could have brought down a castle wall, but the nimble demon ducked beneath it and dashed forward, out of formation, and slashing a deep gouge in Nyxus' thigh with his blade.

Nyxus howled as the demon's enchanted steel opened up his flesh, but the wound was not deep. He recovered quickly and brought his maul back in a defensive stance.

As often happens in clashes of champions, the fighting drew away from the two commanders, as if the rank and file sensed that the outcome

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of such a duel was far more important than a victory gained by massed troops. "I think they want a show, my friend," the demon said, looking about at the widening space that was developing around them.

Nyxus grunted, and stepped back a pace to get his bearings. He smiled savagely. "So be it demon," he said. " I much prefer this kind of confrontation anyway. Nothing left to chance or the foolishness of underlings."

"I quite agree," the babau commander said, returning the smile. "But I hope you don't expect me to quit the field once I've killed you."

"Hah!" Nyxus laughed. "Would that we could have met under better circumstances. I think I would have liked fighting alongside you. What you have done with these babau is simply unimaginable and some of the finest field command I've ever seen. What is your name, demon?"

"I thank you for your kind words," the babau said courteously. "I am Azadan, master daemon. And what shall I call you?"

"You have the honor to face Nyxus, greatest of the terradaemons and commander of my lord Yaghur Hod's forces."

"Excellent. You are a worthy foe, I have no doubt. Shall we begin?"

With a nod, Nyxus stepped forward into the large area that had suddenly cleared of fighting. The battle still raged around them, but here in this one spot, an anxious stillness reigned. Nyxus quickly examined his foe as Azadan moved fluidly forward. He noticed immediately that his opponent was faster and more skilled with his weapon. However, Nyxus was far larger, had a greater reach, and could easily inflict a deadly blow with a single strike of his heavy maul. The massive terradaemon had seen strength and power win out over superior skill many times, and he planned to follow in that stead.

Shield held out before him, Azadan circled Nyxus slowly, his sword cocked over his left shoulder. Nyxus matched his opponent, with his maul held out before him in both hands in a neutral guard. The two fiends circled for another moment and then Azadan suddenly bounded forward, moving half a dozen paces toward Nyxus in the space of a single heartbeat. Instead of swinging his maul at the onrushing babau, Nyxus thrust with it, jabbing with the heavy head. His blow fell short, however, as Azadan came to a sudden halt just outside his range. Even with the minute motion generated by thrusting with his weapon, Nyxus was still pulled off balance for half a second, and, expecting his opponent to race in under his guard, his snapped his weapon up against his body. Unfortunately, this was what Azadan had

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been waiting for. Any long-hafted weapon, such as Nyxus' maul, vastly limited its wielder's choice of strikes when held close to the body.

The babau leapt forward and his sword slashed out in a blurring arc. Nyxus pushed his weapon out to ward off the blow he thought was aimed at his midsection, only to bring Azadan's true target within reach. The babau's sword cut into the fingers of Nyxus' right hand where they curled around the haft of his weapon. The enchanted blade bit through flesh and bone, and four of the thick digits fell to the ground, completely severed from the hand.

After delivering his strike, Azadan bounced back, out of range, leaving his foe howling in pain and cradling his mangled right hand. Nyxus had never known such pain, and he knew that his foe had dealt a deciding blow in their duel. He could no longer grip his weapon with both hands, and the heavy maul was far too cumbersome to wield in one hand with any skill. He took a step back and let his right hand drop, now dripping a thick torrent of blood onto the dusty plain, and took up his weapon with his left hand alone.

"That was a bit unfair, I'll admit," Azadan said, with a sad smile. "But I don't have time to waste in a protracted duel."

Nyxus stared at his opponent with abject hatred. Any respect he had borne the babau warrior had evaporated in the shrieking agony of his wounded hand. But he was not without his own inequitable devices, and he focused his single, glaring red eye on the babau and summoned his innate daemonic ability. Waves of strength-sapping power flowed from Nyxus' gaze, and slammed into his opponent. Every terradaemon possessed a strong connection to the Elemental Plane of Earth, and could draw upon that plane's symbolic strength to enhance its own might — or to steal it from another. Nyxus now focuses this terrible power on his foe, and the effect was immediate. Azadan staggered beneath the magical onslaught, and went to one knee, his exhaustion plain to see.

Now it was Nyxus' turn to boast. "There, you little worm," he seethed. "That took the fight out of you, didn't it?"

Azadan leaned weakly against his shield, gasping. He said nothing and only stared, his black eyes filled with malice. The babau's blade was till in his right hand, although it hung limp at his side.

Nyxus was giddy with excitement. His foe lacked even the strength to speak. The big terradaemon hefted his maul in his left hand, the terrible

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weight of the weapon made feather light by the fierce rush of adrenaline that surged into his system. He charged, bringing the maul back over his head to gain the maximum amount of force when he delivered the killing blow to Azadan's unprotected head.

His feet slammed into the earth with earth shaking force as Nyxus pounded across the ground toward his foe. His opponent's head hung down over his shield in a resignation of defeat. This disappointed the big terradaemon. He wanted to see his enemy's face before he died. Azadan seemed to hear the silent demand, and the babau lifted his head, and his eyes bored directly into Nyxus' own. There was no fear there, and the steely confidence in the babau's gaze, along with the terrible smile plastered across his skeletal face, left no doubt in Nyxus' horrified mind that he had been duped.

It was far too late to halt his forward momentum, and with little choice but to follow through, Nyxus continued with his awkward, yet powerful, left-handed strike. The maul whistled down toward Azadan, but the babau, who had simply feigned his weakness, let go of his shield and rolled forward beneath the blow and between Nyxus' pillar-like legs. The demon's sword slashed up as he rolled and opened up his opponent's bowels in a wide, ugly gash. The terradaemon's hammer struck the ground with a reverberating thud, and his voice lifted in a horrified scream of utter anguish and pain.

The roll carried Azadan forward and behind his opponent, who had now sunk to his knees in a spreading pool of his own gore.

The terradaemon heard his foe walking up behind him. His body trembled with pain and loss of blood. He said two words: "Quickly, please."

There was no answer other than the whirring hum of a blade cutting through the air. Nyxus felt the sword bite into his neck, saw the world tumble about in a crazy spinning arc, and then darkness.

* * * * *

"Nyxus and Zeeosh are dead my lord," Turgon said.

Yaghur Hod barely heard his cacodaemon general. His eyes were locked on the horrific chaos of the battle before him. He and Turgon stood well behind the front line, surrounded by a few cacodaemon guards and overshadowed by the looming bulk of the Beast.

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The Archodaemon watched the battle with fear in his heart. There was little chance they would actually lose. His troops were too many to fall to such inferior numbers. But in the all the confusion, he had lost sight of the demon champion, this Hazag, the one who would wield *Fiendbleeder* against him.

He had watched this demon lord rain fire down upon his daemons, stymie the efforts of every one of his cacodaemons, and then simply disappear. Add to this the unbelievable precision with which the demons fought, led by this apparently invulnerable babau commander, and the fact that his azodaemons had been stopped cold by a flight of elite vrocks, and Yaghur Hod felt sure that fate was working directly against him. Even the lowly dretch horde, sent against the flanks of his army, had managed to cause enough destruction to keep the cryptodaemons from entering the battle in support of the terradaemons. It was an awesomely ridiculous turn of events, and if this Hazag could truly wield *Fiendbleeder,* then there was the chance, however infinitesimal, that he would be destroyed.

Yaghur Hod closed his human eyes — he wore the form of the wizened old man this day — and wished for the strong, reassuring words of Dyzaja, his lost lover and confidant, foully slain by Gemnez and Hedrenatherax. She would have soothed him with her words and with the comforting presence of her skill and steel. He was no coward, and he commanded tremendous power. Only once before, had the greatest of daemons ever feared for his life, in that long ago battle against the guardinal lord Auriliach of Elysium. He had nearly been killed then, and he couldn't help but feel that his ancient foe had somehow risen again to torment him.

"Master, did you not — ,"

"I heard you, Turgon!" Yaghur Hod snapped, whirling around to face the cacodaemon. "Although I do not understand how you could think that I would not know these trifling details."

"Trifling, master?" Turgon said, incredulously. "Two of your generals are slain, and the fate of both flanks as well as the center of the army is undecided."

Yaghur Hod clenched both fists around his scythe, and for a moment considered resuming his true form and cutting the impudent cacodaemon to pieces. But he could not deny the truth of Turgon's words, no matter how they displeased him. "Then take your cacodaemons and take over command of the center," he said, his voice shaking with barely controlled rage.

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The wily cacodaemon opened his mouth to protest, but then thought better of it. Instead, he simply bowed and walked away. The few cacodaemons in the area followed their leader; leaving Yaghur Hod alone with the massive, alien form of the Beast.

Shall I decide this battle for you, usurper? The Beast's words suddenly filled Yaghur Hod's mind.

"No, I want you here," Yaghur Hod said and shook his head. "I may need you."

I smell fear on you. This is new.

"I am not afraid," the Archodaemon replied.

You lie. But it makes no difference. There are powerful souls to feed on here, and they will come to us soon.

Yaghur Hod turned and stared up into the lantern-like yes of the Beast. "What do you mean, they will come to us?"

Can you not feel the wheels of fate grinding us together, usurper? One shall come for you, and I will not stand in his way.

"No, your oath was to serve me in whatever capacity I desire," Yaghur Hod said, fear growing cold in his gut.

Not this time. I will devour his allies, but you must face the other alone.

"Why? You could crush this Hazag with little effort."

Perhaps, but he carries a piece of you with him. My oath was not to harm you if you provide me with the souls I crave. You have lived up to your end of the bargain, and I will do the same. I cannot touch him as long as he bears your essence.

Yaghur Hod's human eyes grew wide. The portion of his power that was deposited in *Fiendbleeder*, which he had come here to reclaim to complete his resurgence, was now the one thing that could undo him. The Archodaemon's form shifted and blurred, and he was the tall, faceless daemon again. He clenched *Blightrazor* tightly and forced the fear and doubt from his mind. *If I must rip victory from the jaws of fate*, he thought, *so be it*.

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Gemnez unwound the massive length of spiked chain from around his waist and twirled it in a slow, lazy figure eight. Beside him the bird-like Pazuzu and the hulking form of Hedrenatherax stood readying their own weapons. The lord of Vrack was armed with a giant, saw-bladed falchion, which he gripped with his right hand, and, of course, the bony scythe that projected from the end of his left forearm. Pazuzu carried his familiar greatsword, a massive blade carried in a thick leather scabbard across his back.

Each of the three great fiends had also managed to find a bit of armor to fit their odd frames. Gemnez had squeezed his bulk into a mail hauberk of blackened steel, giving him the ungainly appearance of an overstuffed, metallic sausage. Hedrenatherax wore a breastplate of red steel, complete with pauldrons and tassets to cover his shoulders and thighs. Pazuzu had borrowed a studded leather vest and boiled leather greaves and vambraces from one of his Dreadwings, all specially made for flying creatures.

"Well, there it is," Pazuzu said, and nodded to where the massive form of Yaghur Hod's Beast loomed behind the raging battle between the two armies. "Hazag will be waiting for us to engage that thing before he confronts Yaghur Hod."

Hedrenatherax cut at the air a few times with his falchion and grunted in acknowledgement. "It certainly is a big bastard," he said. "Even Uzog looks puny compared to that thing." The demon lord jerked his head back to where the massive bull-headed demon stood, idly chewing on the corpse of a cryptodaemon it had found somewhere.

Pazuzu reached over his shoulder and drew his greatsword with a raking hiss, and then planted the point of the blade in the hard-packed earth. "So, Gemnez and I will fly over, move into position, and await you and Uzog to teleport in," he said. "Does that sound about right?"

"Unless you can divine a better way to move through two battling armies," Hedrenatherax said sarcastically. "Although I don't understand how we are going to teleport. Yaghur Hod would be a fool not to have a dimensional barrier in place."

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"Oh, he does," someone said from behind Hedrenatherax. The demon lord whirled around to see the ebony form of Hazag standing a few feet away, smiling mischievously. "And so did the three of you."

"You broke all three at once?" Pazuzu asked, incredulously.

Hazag strode up to the three fiends. "Well, not be insulting, but you three aren't exactly much of challenge, magically speaking. I probably could have broken your wards when I was a mortal."

"Such hubris," Gemnez said, clucking his tongue in reproof. "But, it seems that any doubts I had in your abilities were misplaced."

"It looks like your little friend is getting the worst of it now," Hedrenatherax said, smiling foully and pointing to where Azadan and his babau battled the daemonic army. The cryptodaemons had largely defeated the dretch hordes and had come streaming over in support of the terradaemons. Azadan was now surrounded on all sides, and it would only be a matter of time until his was annihilated by the sheer number of his foes.

"Then we should waste no more time," Hazag said. "Pazuzu. Gemnez. I'm ready if you are."

"Well, I guess we can't put this off any longer," Pazuzu said, lifting his great sword from the ground. "Shall we, my fat friend?"

"Gladly, Lord Pazuzu," Gemnez said and spread his stubby wings; he then hopped into the air with an ungainly bounce. Pazuzu followed, although his takeoff was all grace and precision, without so much as a wasted flutter. The two fiends rose rapidly and set out over the two battling armies to where Yaghur Hod and the Beast waited.

"Uzog! Come here!" Hedrenatherax barked at the massive demon behind him. Upon hearing his name, Uzog crunched up the last of the cryptodaemon he had been eating and lumbered over to where Hazag and Hedrenatherax waited.

"All right, freak, we're ready," Hedrenatherax said, glaring at Hazag. "Remember: I *will* survive this, and once this mess is over, there will be only one demon lord in Vrack. Do you understand?"

Hazag threw his head back and laughed at Hedrenatherax's threat. "With what we are going to face in the next thirty seconds, you are actually concerned about me or Pazuzu stealing away your precious domain? I think your priorities are a bit skewed."

"Vrack is *mine,*" Hedrenatherax seethed. "And I will not relinquish it to any part of it to ambitious demon lords, or anomalous freaks."

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"As much as I need you to succeed in what is to come, I don't imagine I shall be overly concerned if yon Beast grinds you into jelly," Hazag said, his eyes glowing cherry red.

Hedrenatherax nodded, and grinned savagely. "Now we understand one another," he said.

"I suppose we do," Hazag said, and placed one hand on Hedrenatherax's shoulder and another on Uzog's flank. He spoke a single syllable, and the three fiends disappeared.

* * * * *

Yaghur Hod saw Pazuzu and Gemnez come winging over the battling armies, and gripped his scythe tightly. The Beast also saw the two fiends and turned its bulbous, reptilian head to stare down at the Archodaemon. *Ready yourself, usurper,* it said.

"Where are the others?" Yaghur Hod wondered aloud. The oaf Hedrenatherax could not be seen, nor could the mysterious Hazag. Pazuzu and Gemnez could not hope to challenge the Beast alone; it had to be a ruse of some kind. The great daemon closed his eyes and felt the magical weave of energy around himself and the general area. He had erected a simple yet powerful ward that would keep fiends from teleporting in and out of his immediate vicinity. With relief he felt that the ward was still in place.

Yaghur Hod and the Beast stood at the rear of the massive daemonic army, in a barren patch of plain well away form the fighting. With his wards in place, the Archodaemon felt secure in his position, and until recently, had believed that the Beast would aid him against the demonic champion Hazag. Now that he would face this enigmatic demon lord alone, he felt vulnerable, something that the eons-old daemon was unaccustomed to. He could summon Turgon and his cacodaemons to further protect him, but his pride would not allow such a show of weakness.

Ah, these are souls worth devouring, the Beast said, as Gemnez and Pazuzu landed a few hundred yards away. *I shall savor them.* The great behemoth body of the eldritch fiend suddenly burst into motion, as it eagerly advanced upon the two fiends ahead.

Yaghur Hod watched Pazuzu and Gemnez ready themselves to meet the Beast's charge, and then to his horror, the unthinkable happened. Two figures suddenly blinked into existence between the Beast and the

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two archfiends. The scaly, sickle-clawed form of Hedrenatherax was immediately recognizable, although the other, a gigantic bull-headed fiend armed with maul, was not.

They teleported in! Yaghur Hod realized with growing terror. *And that means —* , he suddenly whirled around, knowing what would be there, but frantically denying such a horrific possibility.

Hazag stood not more than a dozen paces away, the long, ebony length of *Fiendbleeder* gripped in both hands. The demon lord held the sword with some awkwardness, but his eyes blazed with malevolent purpose and inextinguishable tenacity. "At last, I meet the great Yaghur Hod," the black-skinned demon lord said without a hint of sarcasm or rancor.

"It was unavoidable," Yaghur Hod replied, and understood at last that the multiverse stood at a crossroads. The future lay with either him or his opponent. He had been a fool to believe that his conquest would come without risk or fear. All new things were birthed under such circumstances, and this would be no different. The Archodaemon brought his scythe up in a salute, and bowed, his massive green eyes flaring as he felt the weight of doubt and uncertainty leave him.

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Gemnez felt the first stirrings of real terror the moment he set foot before the towering form of the Beast. It radiated a palpable dread, the staggering weight of an evil so ancient that it seemed they faced a nightmare, a specter of some gloom-haunted prehistory, rather than a creature of real substance.

Pazuzu too must have felt the Beast's overwhelming aura, for he shrunk back beside Gemnez, and brought his blade before him as if to ward off the eldritch thing's terrible fearful emanations. "Where in all the layers of the Abyss is Hedrenatherax?" he hissed at Gemnez.

"There," Gemnez pointed as Hedrenatherax and Uzog materialized not more than twenty yards away.

Hedrenatherax and Uzog beat a hasty retreat before the advancing Beast, until they joined Pazuzu and Gemnez in an evenly spaced line. "Can we actually beat that thing?" Hedrenatherax asked, his voice full of awe.

"Not a chance," Gemnez replied stoically, and produced a rough scrap of aged parchment from under his mail. "But if you can give me time to read

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this scroll, then we might actually survive the next couple of minutes."

The Beast had stopped moving forward and stood regarding the four fiends with something like curiosity, or perhaps mild amusement.

"Now, Pazuzu," Hedrenatherax said with a shaky breath. "We'll attack from two angles; I'll engage it on the ground, while you harass it from the air."

"That's your strategy?" Pazuzu scoffed.

"Unless you have something better in mind, you feathered fu — "

"My lords!" Gemnez cut in. "Time really is short. There are two parts to this spell, and the first, once completed, will force the Beast into its true form, which will make your job much more … interesting. So I suggest you come to a consensus on how best to deal with the present situation."

"Fine," Pazuzu said. "We'll do what you suggested, Hedrenatherax."

"Then go!" Gemnez shouted.

Hedrenatherax brandished his falchion and began to move forward at a slow trot. Pazuzu leapt into the air and hovered thirty or so feet above his companion. The Beast watched the two demon lords approach, but did little but stare at them.

"Uzog!" Gemnez shouted. "Guard me." The massive demon grunted in reply, and moved to stand before Gemnez. The fat devil then drew in a deep breath and began to read the squirming script on the scroll he held in both flabby paws. Gemnez's voice rose in strength and tenor, and the ungainly, phlegm-soaked syllables of the ancient spell croaked in a vomitous tide from his throat.

The two demon lords were almost upon the Beast when Gemnez began reading, and the effect it had was immediate and terrible. The Beast's head snapped up, dark and terrible realization filling its alien features, and it burst into a dead charge toward Gemnez.

Seeing the change in the Beast's demeanor, the Lord of Vrack moved to intercept the charging titan, while Pazuzu moved to do the same. The two demon lords struck the Beast simultaneously, their blades slashing out to gouge into its rough reptilian hide. It was like trying to cut through thick rubber, and both demon lords did little more than scratch its scaly integument. However, they did succeed in getting the Beast's attention, and it slowed to deal with them, lashing out with its claws.

Hedrenatherax managed to duck the first claw swipe by slamming his body to the ground. Pazuzu, however, was not so lucky, and although he

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twisted his body in the air with crazed agility, the Beast's massive talons clipped him hard enough to send the demon lord spiraling to the earth.

Leaping to his feet, Hedrenatherax charged forward, slashing with his falchion and the bony blade of his left forearm. The Beast towered above him, and its claws, like two mighty hammers, descended together to crush him. He twisted away from the blow, and dashed between the towering abomination's legs, scoring deep cuts along both as he passed by. Again the wounds seemed to have little effect, and the Beast simply whirled around with horrifying speed and caught the running demon lord with a contemptuous backhanded slap. It was like being struck by a tidal wave, and Hedrenatherax was flung from his feet to land in ignoble heap over fifteen feet away.

Pazuzu, reeling from his own brush with the Beast's awesome strength, had climbed to his feet just as his fellow demon lord had been struck down. The avian demon lord shook his head, and called upon his innate magic, doubling in size so that he was only dwarfed by the Beast rather than utterly overwhelmed by it. Instead of charging, as Hedrenatherax had done, Pazuzu chose a more circuitous route and dashed around to the Beast's left flank. Its attention was currently focused on Hedrenatherax, who was climbing groggily to his feet, so Pazuzu summoned every ounce of strength he possessed and risked a wild, powerful strike just behind the Beast's left knee. The demon lord's greatsword whistled through the air and slammed into the Beast's flesh with enough force to gouge a deep gash in its hide. Pazuzu grinned with satisfaction as his arms were suddenly coated with a warm torrent of thick, black blood.

The Beast threw its head back and bellowed in pain, and again it moved with uncanny speed to home in on its attacker. Pazuzu attempted to flee into the air, but one massive, spade-clawed hand descended to wrap around his body in a crushing embrace. The avian demon lord struggled frantically, hammering his sword into the Beast's thick fingers. But he had no leverage, and his blows barely scored the thick, reptilian skin. He watched in horror as he was lifted toward that huge, gaping maw, which opened wide to receive him. Pazuzu's mouth fell open in surprise, as he suddenly realized that his eons-long life was truly about to end.

Gemnez's voice had reached a terrible crescendo as he neared the completion of the first part of the ancient spell. The last syllable rolled off his forked tongue with a rapturous release of mystic energies. The fat devil

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felt his body suddenly come alive with awful power, and the air before him rippled with flashes of crimson light. These luminous streaks gathered suddenly, coalescing into a massive floating symbol: a five-pointed star surrounding a glaring eye.

The effect on the Beast was nothing short of awe-inspiring, and it stumbled backward, howling in a voice that wrenched at the souls of every living creature in the area. It dropped Pazuzu, who was seconds away from being ground into paste between its titanic jaws.

Pazuzu struck the ground with bone-jarring force, but he managed to hold onto his sword. He glanced back at Gemnez, standing, eyes wide, mouth agape, behind the strange floating symbol, obviously frozen from shock and awe. "Keep going, you fool!" he shouted, and his words seemed to shake the fat devil from his stupor, and he began reading from the scroll again.

Hedrenatherax, having regained his feet during the reprieve granted him when the Beast was about to devour Pazuzu, dashed over to his companion and pulled the feathered demon lord to his feet. Together the two fiends watched with growing horror as the fiery symbol etched into the air behind them took its full effect on the Beast.

Howling and spasming, the Beast fell to its knees, its entire body quaking with fell energy. Then, suddenly, it stopped and a momentary stillness came over the thing's colossal body. Its squamous face split into a horrid facsimile of a grin, and then its body simply burst open, spilling a riotous tangle of tentacles, slime, and myriad sensory organs onto the dusty earth. A cyclopean pile of protoplasmic horror now flopped and writhed where the Beast had once been, as the fiery symbol forced it into its true form.

Demon lords were well-accustomed to evil and horror, but the indescribable *thing* that now confronted them was beyond anything they had ever encountered. Terror took root in their souls, and the overwhelming desire to flee ripped through their brains. Only the shrieking syllables of Gemnez's continued chant kept them from doing so, and the two great fiends grimly hefted their weapons and moved forward to do battle with chaos incarnate.

There was no thought of tactics or strategy. Those concepts had no place in such a battle. It was simply the struggle of the new against the old, sane evil against the crazed void of ineffable madness. The two demon lords slammed into the titanic mass of writhing tentacles, their blades slashing

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and hacking at the flailing appendages. Ichor splattered as their weapons sank into rubbery flesh, but they might as well have been attempting to cut down a forest with butter knife. Dozens of tentacles evaded their weapons and wrapped around their bodies with unbreakable strength. They were lifted from the ground, and stuffed into the quivering central mass of the eldritch horror, disappearing from view beneath a morass of semi-liquescent flesh. Unchallenged, the gargantuan tentacled terror slithered forward, slime-coated appendages thrusting forward to engulf the tiny, insignificant creature that dared to defy it.

Gemnez began backpedaling slowly, his voice still ringing out above the chaotic battlefield, filling the air with the dark, alien syllables of the banishing spell. Uzog saw the threat to his master and moved forward to intercept the Beast as it writhed toward them. It was either severe stupidity or peerless bravery that propelled Uzog forward into the terrible squirming mass, but forward he went, his hammer crashing up and down upon the plastic, bubbling flesh before him.

The Beast struggled to wrap its tentacles around Uzog, and the mighty bull-headed fiend fought with frenzied strength, and batted them away with his hammer. But all the strength in the multiverse could not stop such an alien horror, and eventually Uzog's blows slowed, and more tentacles lashed at him, scoring his hide with deep lacerations that seemed to rot rather than bleed. The great demon's strength was flagging, and the Beast simply dragged him along with it as it squirmed toward Gemnez.

The first tentacle caressed Gemnez's leg, but he did not falter, and as a forest of writhing appendages descended upon him, the final words of the spell fell from lips, and the world exploded into light and fire.

A terrible ululating howl burst from the Beast as a flood of azure light poured over it, withering its flesh and sending up geysers of acrid smoke. The light persisted, shrinking the terrible mass of alien flesh with searing efficiency, until at last, nothing remained but three inert bodies, the withered, blackened forms of Hedrenatherax, Pazuzu, and Uzog. The light winked out as the spell completed, and the Beast was banished back to its lightless tomb beneath the Gloomspire on Hades.

A thick, blubbering sigh escaped Gemnez's lips. He toppled forward, face first, into the dirt, utterly spent.

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Pyrak stared through the misty window separating the world that existed within the sentient sword *Fiendbleeder* from the physical reality of the world beyond. He saw the tall, gaunt form of Yaghur Hod and heard the voice of Hazergal, now the demon lord Hazag, speak his challenge.

The imprisoned demon lord looked back over his shoulder to where a figure identical to the Hazag of the real world lounged in a great throne. Behind the figure, a massive cloth backdrop of blood red silk fluttered softly.

Fiendbleeder grinned savagely, the fiery runes of his borrowed face glowing brightly. "It is almost time, demon," it said. "The opportunity we need is swiftly approaching."

"You heard Gemnez, did you not?" Pyrak said. "If Hazag slays Yaghur Hod, you will be destroyed."

"Hah!" *Fiendbleeder* laughed. "As soon as Hazag moves to engage Yaghur Hod, the barriers he has erected to keep me out shall fall. I can already feel them weakening. His concentration must be on his enemy, and when that happens, you and I shall force him to teleport away."

"It's quite a risk you take," Pyrak remarked. "What of we are unable to gain control of his mind?"

"Inconceivable," *Fiendbleeder* scoffed. "No demon has ever resisted me."

Then why do you need me? Pyrak thought sarcastically. *And why has Hazag managed to keep you out, forcing you to rely on a lapse of his attention to snare him?*

"What are you thinking, demon?" *Fiendbleeder* suddenly asked, suspicion filling its monotonous voice.

Pyrak turned and smiled. "I am thinking that I agree with you," he said. "An opportunity is most definitely at hand."

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"That is mine," Yaghur Hod said, pointing his scythe toward the great black blade of *Fiendbleeder*. "You would be best served by simply handing it over to me." The Archodaemon's voice resonated through the air, disembodied but alarmingly potent.

Hazag shifted his grip upon the greatsword and smiled. "And let you crash through the multiverse uncontested?" he said. "Where is the challenge in that?"

Yaghur Hod moved forward slowly, his scythe held in both long fingered hands, his grip relaxed, neutral, the hallmarks of one who knows his weapon. "You would rather be destroyed?" he asked, and began to circle to his left.

"Are you saying that I would survive if I returned the sword to you?" Hazag asked and matched his opponent's movements. While he moved, he dipped into the vast reservoir of magical energy within him, and flooded his body with nearly a dozen spells. Shields of arcane energy sprung up around the demon lord, invisible barriers designed to ward off blade and spell. His reflexes were honed to perfection and his limbs swelled with peerless strength.

"I have lost many valuable servants this day," Yaghur Hod said. "I would be well served to replace them with one of your obvious talents."

"I want no part of your conquest, daemon." Hazag said bitterly. "This ends for me now, one way or the other. If you kill me, then I am released from this odious plane, and if I slay you, then I want no part of conquest or sovereignty, here or anywhere."

Hazag studied Yaghur Hod's featureless face. It was unreadable, although his eyes glowed brighter for a moment. Anger? Disappointment? It was impossible to tell.

"Very well, then I will simply take *Fiendbleeder* from your corpse and mourn the waste of such a valuable resource."

Hazag felt the air about the Archodaemon stir, as he too erected a vast web of magical defenses and transmutations. *Fiendbleeder* felt warm in his grip, and its weight was both oppressive and somehow reassuring.

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He looked beyond his foe to where the Beast was swatting at Pazuzu and Hedrenatherax, batting at them with its massive claws. Gemnez's voice could be heard above the din of battle, and its dry shrieking syllables were terrible to hear.

"You worry for your allies?" Yaghur Hod asked and danced forward, feinting with his scythe.

Hazag did not fall for the ruse, and simply stepped back out of his opponent's range. "They are capable," he said simply. "We have all chosen our battles this day, and mine is with you."

"The Beast will strip the flesh from their bones and wrench apart their souls," Yaghur Hod said, and began circling again. "I could spare them such a fate, if you wished?"

In reply Hazag rushed forward, his magically augmented speed carrying him to his foe in a blur of frenzied action. He brought *Fiendbleeder* up in a vicious uppercut that would have split Yaghur Hod from crotch to collarbone had it landed, but the Archodaemon's scythe flicked out, and slapped the big sword aside with contemptuous ease. Yaghur Hod did not follow up on his defense and simply moved out of range.

Hazag retreated as well, sword held out in front of him in a low guard. "I doubt even you could stop that *thing* once it has set its mind to something," he said. "And as I said before, they have chosen their battle and have accepted the risks and consequences it carries."

"You are a fool — " Yaghur Hod began, but suddenly the world was aflame with a brilliant crimson glow. Both fiends turned to see a massive flaming sigil — a five pointed star encompassing a great eye — hanging in the air before Gemnez. The symbol evoked a queasy unease in Hazag, but the effect it had on the Beast was nothing short of stupefying.

"No, it cannot be," Yaghur Hod said softly, as the Beast dissolved into a roiling mass of tentacular protoplasm. The Archodaemon's weapon dipped as he looked on stunned, as Gemnez began to chant again, his voice lifting in that awful croaking shriek that could not be called words by any sane and rational creature.

Hazag wrenched his gaze away from the sight of the Beast, and saw that Yaghur Hod still stood, awestruck and unmoving, utterly captivated by the terrible spectacle before him. Hazag saw his opportunity and rushed to the attack. His pounding footsteps broke Yaghur Hod's stupor, and he jerked his weapon up to ward off Hazag's blow … an instant too late.

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Fiendbleeder's great black blade slammed into Yaghur Hod's right shoulder, slicing through his gray robes and into the flesh beneath. The Archodaemon twisted away from the blow, negating some of its impact, but bright red blood splattered and the air was suddenly filled with the Archodaemon's agonized screech.

Had Hazag been more of a swordsman, he could have followed up on his successful attack, pressing his advantage with a rain of heavy blows. But his relative unfamiliarity with melee combat caused him to pause, just for a moment, at the unexpected pleasure of actually landing a blow against his opponent. Yaghur Hod, however, was no such amateur, and he and his scythe had emerged victorious from thousands of battles. Even as the Archodaemon was spinning away from the impact of Hazag's strike, his weapon was moving, arcing low under his foe's outstretched arms. *Blightrazor's* jagged edge scraped along Hazag's abdomen, ripping through magical shielding and the demon lord's own rocky flesh.

Hissing in pain, Hazag jerked back, his abdomen dripping blood, the bright red now an inky black under the bathing glow of Gemnez's flaming sigil. But his magical shielding had stopped much of the force of Yaghur Hod's stroke, and the wound was largely superficial.

The right sleeve of Yaghur Hod's robe was sticky and black with his own ichor, although he moved as if the wound did not bother him at all. "Savor the sight of my blood, demon," the air around the Archodaemon snarled. "There are few in the multiverse that have seen it flow."

Hazag said nothing, and simply grimaced, as the pain in his abdomen grew steadily worse. The terrible bite of *Blightrazor* continued to burn, filling his wound with an acidic agony that was nearly unbearable. Hazag gritted his teeth against the pain, shifted his grip on *Fiendbleeder,* and, holding the sword high over his head, moved forward cautiously.

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"Now, demon!" *Fiendbleeder* howled from his throne. "The pain is weakening his resolve."

Pyrak stared at the combat unfolding outside, through the misty window between *Fiendbleeder's* mind and the world beyond. He could feel Hazag's mind now, a powerful engine of arcane might and mortal failings. The wards around the demon lord's conscience had failed almost

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completely, and *Fiendbleeder's* unceasing siege upon them had finally won through.

The sword still wore the face of Hazag, and it now leapt from its throne and descended upon Pyrak. "Aid me, fool! We almost have him!"

Pyrak saw Hazag falter in the world beyond, staggering and stumbling as he fought for control of his own mind. The demon lord knew if he did not act now, Hazag would be destroyed and he would spend eternity locked within the dark prison of *Fiendbleeder's* mind.

"Very well, sword," he said acidly. "Let me assist you." Pyrak closed his eyes and flung his consciousness out into the void of *Fiendbleeder's* mind, his thoughts coalesced into a single sharp word, a summons he hoped would not fail. *Come!*

"What are you doing!" *Fiendbleeder* howled, realizing that Pyrak had not added his strength to the effort to control Hazag. The face it wore curled into a vicious snarl and its hands formed into crooked claws. *Fiendbleeder* stalked toward Pyrak, rage and hatred filling its stony features.

Pyrak watched *Fiendbleeder* advance toward him and wondered if the sword could actually destroy him, here in this fabricated reality. And then, suddenly, he felt the presence of others, many others. The air between he and *Fiendbleeder* shimmered and two figures appeared, the lumpy, malformed shape of Chemosh and the wispy feminine shadow of Erishkegal.

Fiendbleeder jerked back from the two ancient demon lords, its face filled with sudden fear. "You," it breathed. "How are you here?"

Pyrak could feel Erishkegal's smile, and her laughter, filled with the haughty tones of aristocratic pleasure, filled him with confidence.

Oh come now, sword, Erishkegal mocked. *You know me, and you should know Chemosh as well.*

Fiendbleeder glanced nervously toward the misty window of the outside world, where Yaghur Hod now stood over Hazag, obviously gloating as the demon lord attempted to regain complete control of his mind. "You fools are going to damn us all!" it shrieked. "Do you three think you can thwart me!?"

"It is not only we three," Chemosh said smoothly, and the throne room suddenly filled with wavering shadows, each bearing a terrible outline that suggested something dark and horrific beneath. "We are all here."

Fiendbleeder reeled back from the army of shadows. "Don't you understand, you fools?" it howled. "If I die, you die with me!"

"We understand perfectly, sword," Pyrak said and moved to stand

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next to Chemosh and Erishkegal. He pointed one long taloned finger at *Fiendbleeder* where he cringed against his throne. "Take him."

Fiendbleeder howled in horror as a tidal wave of shadows crashed down upon it.

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Hazag moved slowly, trying to predict Yaghur Hod's next attack, but the Archodaemon was wary, and stayed beyond his reach. He realized that he would need to press the attack. The pain of his wound was becoming distracting, and a faint buzz, like the droning of an angry insect, worried at the back of his mind. Hazag steeled himself and charged forward.

Suddenly, the angry buzz in his mind became a shriek that swiftly culminated in a dry, monotone voice. A voice he had heard before. *Stop!* It shouted. *Flee!* Hazag felt his mind wander and latch onto the simple arcane syllables of a teleport spell, and to his horror, he did so directly against his own desire. Realization crashed into him, and he stumbled backward away from Yaghur Hod. *Fiendbleeder* had broken through.

"*No*!" Hazag shrieked aloud and sank to his knees. *Fiendbleeder* was till in his grasp, his fingers clenched around its hilt in an unbreakable vice.

No, mortal, the sword droned. *I have need of your strength. You shall not throw it away here. Now, flee!*

Hazag fought frantically against the desire to teleport away, and he was nearly oblivious as Yaghur Hod strode up to him, a soft chuckle emanating from the air around the Archodaemon.

"The sword has you, doesn't it, Hazag?" Yaghur Hod asked, his voice mocking. "It has taken on quite a bit of a personality since separating from me all those eons ago."

Flee! Flee! Fiendbleeder shrieked in Hazag's mind. A low moan escaped his lips as he fought with every ounce of strength he had. Pushing the sword's insidious mind away from his own was like trying to shove aside a mountain.

Yaghur Hod leaned on his scythe and stared down at Hazag. He was well out of the demon lord's reach should he recover enough to strike out at him. "It's odd," he observed, his voice light, as if he were lounging his throne room rather than battling an archfiend. "*Dreadskewer* and *Blightrazor* never gained the level of autonomy that *Fiendbleeder* has attained. It must be the

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chaotic influence of you demons that allowed it to grow in such a way."

Hazag glared up at Yaghur Hod. His teeth were clenched and every muscle stood out in his onyx flesh, straining to be free of *Fiendbleeder's* influence.

"I suppose I must kill you now," Yaghur Hod sighed. "A pity. I think you and I could have accomplished incredible things together." The Archodaemon stepped forward and lifted his scythe over his head, preparing to deliver the killing stroke. It was a reckless and powerful stroke, one that that the Archodaemon would have never attempted against an opponent that was not helpless and immobile.

Hazag watched *Blightrazor* descend with agonizing slowness and knew that his death was imminent. But then something changed. The grasping presence of *Fiendbleeder* disappeared, and he felt the presence of another. The fluttering sensation of great feathered wings stirring about his body filled his senses, and a strong, noble voice boomed in his head. *Strike, mortal! Strike now!*

The eyes of the Prince of Change flew wide as he realized that he was again in control of his body. However, Yaghur Hod's killing stroke still descended upon him, and in the fraction of a second before the terrible weapon ripped him open, he rolled forward, his body propelled by the magic and strength of will. He thrust *Fiendbleeder* forward like a great black lance, its razor tip gleaming hellishly in the verdigris glow of Yaghur Hod's pulsing eyes.

The demon lord did not elude the Archodaemon's strike completely, and pain flared suddenly along his back as the scythe slammed into his flesh. But his roll had carried *Fiendbleeder* forward with a shocking power, and it entered Yaghur Hod's body just below where a man's breastbone would be. The sword plowed through the Archodaemon flesh and fully two feet of the blade burst from the fiend's back in a shower of blood.

Hazag collapsed at Yaghur Hod's feet, his hands sliding from *Fiendbleeder's* hilt as the Archodaemon stumbled back from the force of the impaling blow. Pain raked across Hazag's body from his wounds, but he rose to his hands and knees to watch Yaghur Hod's last moments.

It was pitiful sight, he thought. There was no bright explosion of mighty energies released, nor shrieking howls of sword and daemon as they both descended into oblivion. There was only a moment of stunned silence as the ancient fiend fell to his knees, his hands fluttering feebly

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about the hilt of the sword projecting from his body. The green fire in the Archodaemon's eyes winked out, and then, Yaghur Hod, mightiest of daemons, toppled forward, his body folding awkwardly around *Fiendbleeder,* and quietly died.

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Gemnez found Hazag unconscious a few feet away from Yaghur Hod's corpse. The fat devil frowned and bent over the black-skinned demon lord. His pudgy hands moved across Hazag's body, and he smiled, realizing that the demon lord's wounds were already swiftly knitting together.

Suddenly, Gemnez stood and whirled around as he realized he was not alone. A tall crocodile-headed fiend was standing over the corpse of Yaghur Hod, smiling with unabashed delight.

"I didn't think it was possible, devil," Turgon said. "But here he is, cold and dead."

"You will keep our arrangement then?" Gemnez said, his hands sliding down to the coiled length of spiked chain around his expansive waist.

"Of course," Turgon replied. "I have no desire to conquer the Abyss, as if that were even possible." The cacodaemon bent down and rolled Yaghur Hod over. He wrapped one hand around the large red gem that hung from the slain Archodaemon's neck and tugged it free from the chain that secured it. "Now I shall prove to you that my word is good." Turgon closed his eyes and clasped the *Archonatrix* in both hands.

Just then, Gemnez realized that it had become very quiet. He had almost gotten used to the crash and din of the battle between Azadan's babau and the remaining daemons. The fat devil turned to look at where the battle had been raging just a moment ago, and saw, to his delight and amazement, that the daemons were retreating in orderly fashion. Then he saw Azadan, standing in the middle of the last group of babau soldiers, which could not have numbered more than one hundred. The tall fiend did not give chase and the rogue devil watched as he sheathed his sword and began moving toward where Turgon and Gemnez stood.

"And not a moment too soon it would seem," Gemnez said to Turgon. "What will you do now, oh mighty Archodaemon?"

"First, I shall savor the pleasure at hearing my title spoken aloud for the first time," Turgon said with a fanged smile. "Then I shall lead what

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remains of this army back to Hades and establish my rule. I should be able to begin supplying you with larvae and mercenaries in a very short time, should you have need of them."

"Ah, a return to the status quo," Gemnez said. "I'm sure you will find much success and profit in the years to come."

"I am sure you are correct," Turgon said. "And what's better, the noble efforts of your army have removed two of my greatest rivals, which should make my transition to Archodaemon all the smoother."

"I am always happy to be of service," Gemnez said with a bow. "Now, I don't mean to be rude, but if the removal of yourself and your daemons from my adopted home could take place in the very near future, or even now, I would be extraordinarily grateful."

"Of course," Turgon said with a smile. "I hope this only the first of many profitable arrangements." The cacodaemon bowed, and then walked away, joining the great horde of daemons that flowed away from the corpse-littered battleground around Hedrax.

Gemnez gazed overhead and saw that the battle in the air had ended as well. Azodaemons flew off after the retreating daemonic army, while the Dreadwings that remained settled to the earth to rest and heal.

Azadan arrived a few moments after Turgon's departure, and the gore-spattered babau rushed to where Hazag lay. "Is he slain?" the babau commander asked, his voice thick with worry.

"Oh, I think it would take more than those two scratches to bring low our Hazag," Gemnez said. "He will recover shortly."

Looking up at the massive devil, Azadan saw that his face was a knot of doubt and worry. They stood and looked out over the battlefield. "Eighty-three babau and six hundred dretches survived this mess," Azadan said with disgust.

"Yes, and the deaths of the rest have bought us victory," Gemnez replied. "A fair trade if you ask me."

Azadan was silent for a moment, and his right hand flexed around the hilt of his sword. "What of our other demon lords?" he said, finally. "How have they faired."

Gemnez frowned. "We banished the Beast, but it required a heavy toll."

"Hedrenatherax? Pazuzu?" Azadan urged.

"No, they will survive," Gemnez said, his voice filled with disgust. "Although they will be a long time recovering. My brave Uzog, however,

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was killed." There was genuine emotion in the devil's voice. "It was he that allowed me to finish the spell, while those two ingrates were swatted down and enveloped in mere seconds."

"I am sorry for your loss," Azadan said. It was awkward, but he meant it.

"It makes no matter," Gemnez said suddenly. The hint of emotion he had shown disappearing. "There are always more capable servants to be had."

A low moan drew both fiends' attention to where Hazag suddenly stirred. Azadan moved quickly to his friend's side, and helped lift the demon lord to his feet. Hazag stood shakily, wincing with the effort it took to regain his feet. His wounds had healed thanks to the powerful regenerative properties of his demonic body, and they now stood as two raised gray scars across his back and abdomen.

Hazag glanced around, his eyed scanning the virtually abandoned battlefield. "Turgon kept his word it seems," he said. "What of Hedrenatherax and Pazuzu?"

"They live," Gemnez said. "Although someone will have to administer their realms, or they will certainly lose them to rivals while they recover."

"I'll leave that to you, Gemnez," Hazag said, his mouth turning down in disgust at the thought of ruling an Abyssal layer, even for a short while.

"I would be happy to set their respective realms to rights," Gemnez said with an evil grin.

Hazag moved over to the corpse of Yaghur Hod and stared down at it. The mighty Archodaemon seemed only a feeble and unimpressive thing now, devoid of the power and majesty he had held in life. His scythe, *Blightrazor*, lay beside him, although it too seemed drained of life, appearing as nothing more than a mundane weapon. Hazag leaned down and grasped the hilt of *Fiendbleeder.* For a second he expected the sword's horrible voice to fill his head, but there was only silence as he drew the great blade from Yaghur Hod's body.

Like *Blightrazor, Fiendbleeder* had lost its luster, and was now gray and brittle, every bit as much a corpse as the creature who had created it. Hazag suddenly brought the blade down across his knee, and it snapped with a hollow metallic sound, falling away into two equal pieces. For a moment, Hazag thought he heard a muffled scream, but it might have only been the wind howling across the plains of Vrack.

As the brittle fragments of the broken sword dropped to the ground, Hazag felt an unfamiliar emotion rising inside: a lightness, a certain

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buoyancy he had not known since his mortal death. And then he realized what it was. It was freedom. At long last, Hazag was unburdened by the awful weight of destiny. His role had been played out, and whatever came next would be of *his* devising. He tossed the sundered remains of *Fiendbleeder* to the ground, and smiled. "What now, Azadan?" he said, as his friend moved to stand beside him.

"The choice is yours, my lord," Azadan said softly, stating his unquestionable loyalty with the honorific.

Hazag, the Prince of Change, said nothing and stared off over the unending plains of Vrack. The demon lord that was once the mortal mage Hazergal Redfist realized, for the first time in what seemed like eons, that Azadan's words were true: the choice was indeed his.

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Epilogue

Pyrak opened his eyes to pain and the horrific sensation of drowning. He floated in a dank green effluvium that burnt his skin and filled his mouth and nose with agony. Suddenly, his feet struck something solid and he realized that he was at the bottom of some hellish pool. He pushed off from the rocky bottom and sped toward the surface that glittered above him in tones of greasy green and yellow.

The former demon lord broke the surface of the spawning pool coughing and spluttering, spewing the terrible burning fluid from his lungs in great hacking gobs. The edge of the pool was only a few feet away, and he swam toward it. His arms and legs felt weak and palsied, and as he neared the lip of the bowl-shaped crevice that held the spawning pool, he saw a lone babau, armed with a long silver lance, looming above him.

Pyrak tried to swim away from the gaunt, slimy demon, but its lance descended like a striking serpent, and a hook on the end of the prod snagged his skin. He was hauled bodily from the pool, and for the first time, he realized something was horribly wrong. Pyrak was dumped upon the ground beside a dozen or so dretches, their saggy skin glistening with the stinking fluid of the spawning pit. He rolled over and saw a massive stone castle squatting high above him and above that a dank, gangrenous Abyssal sky dotted with writhing purple clouds.

No, no, no, Pyrak's mind quailed. *This can't be. This isn't fair.* He climbed to his feet, shaking with weakness and fear, and looked down the length of his new shape. Flabby skin, scrawny limbs, and a flaccid, almost useless body greeted his horrified eyes. Pyrak, once the most powerful demon lord in the Abyss, had been thrust back to square one: he was a dretch.

The reborn demon looked around the spawning pit of Gemnez Drak, the spawning pit he had once used to stock his own Abyssal horde, and saw that hundreds of dretches were being hauled from the slimy depths of the pool. *Hedrenatherax must be rebuilding his horde*, he thought. The thought of the oafish fool ruling the planes of Vrack infuriated him, but what could he do?

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Pyrak's mind seethed with anger and frustration, and then he realized something that brought a smile to his thick, rubbery lips. He still retained the experience and intellect of a demon lord, and that was an immeasurable advantage. So he was a dretch; there were advantages to that as well. *Who would suspect a dretch? I didn't,* Pyrak thought happily and fell into line with his fellow dretches as they were rounded up by babau servitors.

And so it began again, the endless cycle of the Abyss, as another fiend began the arduous ascent from dretch to demon lord.

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Appendix: Game Statistics

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"The following portions of this book are designated Open Game Content: the stat blocks in this Appendix (excepting proper names) and the names of creatures appearing in the d20 System Reference Document. No other portions of this book are Open Game Content."

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Abrigor "The Plane of the Damned"

The gateway plane of Abrigor is the 111th layer of the Abyss, and serves as the receiving area for the plane's chaotic and evil petitioners. Unlike most of the myriad layers of the Abyss, Abrigor is free from the endless civil strife between demon lords so common to the rest of the plane. This is due to an edict handed down by the Prince of Demons, the *de facto* ruler of the Abyss, forbidding any and all infighting within the boundaries of the layer. The lords obey this law, not out of any loyalty to the Prince of Demons, but because it ultimately serves their purposes. All demon lords have one goal in mind: the accumulation of power, and the eventual ascension to true divinity.

To do this, each archfiend cultivates groups of followers on the Prime Material plane, whose souls then become the property of the demon lord after their death. These souls are a vital part of a demon lord's power, and his uncontested ability to collect these souls is paramount in retaining his position. Therefore, an uneasy truce exists between Abyssal rulers, and for the most part, they do not interfere with each other in regards to collecting the petitioners that are so integral to their continued dominance.

Abrigor itself is a flat, featureless plane, devoid of life, other than the howling multitudes of petitioners waiting impatiently for their eternal reward. The plane is suffused with a dim gray light, and lacks any appreciable weather other than a slight, acrid breeze.

Teleportation magic does not work within the confines of Abrigor for any but the Abyssal rulers or creatures of divine status. The only way into or out of Abrigor is through its many planar gates.

Abrigor has the following traits:

- Normal Gravity, Normal Time, No Elemental Traits
- Infinite Size: Abrigor's flat featureless plain stretches on without end.
- Alterable Morphic: Abrigor corresponds to most material planes in this regard; it cannot be changed by the whim of demon lord or deity.
- Mildly Chaos-Aligned and Mildly Evil Aligned: Lawful characters in Abrigor suffer a –2 penalty on all Charisma-based checks, and good characters suffer the same penalty. Lawful good characters suffer a –4 penalty on all Charisma-based checks.
- Normal Magic: Magic works normally on Abrigor, with the exception of teleportation spells. No creature of less than semi-divine in status, which includes archfiends, may teleport into or out of Abrigor.

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Abu Hol, The Beast

This mountain of scaly horror stands fifty feet tall, and its head is a nightmarish lump that is all toothy maw and great, lantern-like eyes. Its arms are long, multi-jointed, and tipped with massive three-fingered claws, easily capable of scooping up a giant with little effort. As it moves toward you, its shape wavers, and just for an instant you see something writhe and pulsate beneath its skin, something too horrible to even contemplate.

Abu Hol (CR 60)

NE Colossal Outsider (Abomination, Evil, Extraplanar)

Init +14; **Senses** blindsight 500 ft., darkvision 500 ft, true seeing; Listen +112, Spot +112

Language Abyssal, Celestial, Infernal, telepathy 1,000 ft.

AC 82, touch 12, flat-footed 72; Dodge (-8 size, +10 Dex, +70 natural)

hp 2,900 (100 HD), regeneration 40; **DR** 15/epic

Immune ability damage, ability drain, acid, disease, electricity, energy drain, fire, mind-affecting effects, petrification, poison, polymorphing

Resist cold 20, sonic 20; SR 75

Fort +78, **Ref** +68, **Will** +65

Weakness Sigil of Naggath-Orguul

Speed 60 ft. (12 squares), climb 30 ft.

Melee Bite +141 melee (16d6+30/15–20/×3) and 2 horns +141 melee (8d8+15) and 2 claws +141 melee (8d8+15) and tail slap +141 melee (8d6+15) or

Melee 25 tentacle rakes +141 (3d8+30)

Space 30 ft.; Reach 20 ft. (40 ft. with tentacles)

Base Atk +100; Grp +146

Atk Options Awesome Blow, Cleave, Combat Expertise, Dire Charge, Great Cleave, Improved Bull Rush, Improved Overrun, Improved Sunder, Improved Trip, Power Attack; augmented critical, frightful presence, improved grab, rotting constriction, swallow whole

Special Actions horrid form

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 60th)

At will – *blur, dimension door, shield, unhallow*

Abilities Str 70, Dex 31, Con 50, Int 25, Wis 24, Cha 27

SQ abomination traits, constant insight, nondetection

Feats Alertness, Awesome Blow, Blind Fight, Cleave, Combat Expertise, Combat Reflexes, Dodge, Great Cleave, Great Fortitude, Improved Bull Rush, Improved

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Critical (bite), Improve Initiative, Improved Multiattack, Improved Natural Attack (tentacle rake), Improved Overrun, Improved Sunder, Improved Trip, Iron Will, Lightning Reflexes, Multiattack, Power Attack

Epic Feats Devastating Critical (bite), Dire Charge, Epic Fortitude, Epic Reflexes, Epic Toughness (5), Epic Will, Improved Combat Reflexes, Overwhelming Critical (bite)

Skills Bluff +111, Climb +141, Concentration +123, Diplomacy +115, Disguise +8 (+10 acting), Hide +97, Intimidate +113, Knowledge (arcana) +110, Knowledge (the planes) +110, Listen +112, Move Silently +113, Search +110, Sense Motive +110, Spellcraft +112, Spot +112, Survival +7 (+9 following tracks, +9 on other planes), Swim +133

Augmented Critical (Ex): Abu Hol's bite threatens a critical hit on a natural attack roll of 18–20, dealing triple damage on a successful critical hit. This has been further enhanced by the Improved Critical feat.

Constant Insight (Su): Abu Hol makes all its attacks with a +15 insight bonus. It is not affected by the miss chance that applies to attacks against a concealed target.

Frightful Presence (Su): Abu Hol can inspire terror by charging or attacking. Affected creatures must succeed on a DC 68 Will save or become shaken, remaining in that condition as long as they remain with 60 feet of the abomination.

Horrid Form (Su): At will, Abu Hol can take the form of a grotesque, tentacled mass, but all its abilities remain unchanged despite the alien appearance. Changing shape is a standard action. Non-outsiders viewing this transformation and Abu Hol's true form must make a DC 68 Will save or be permanently feebleminded. Nothing short of a *wish*, *miracle*, or direct divine intervention can restore a stricken creature to sanity.

Improved Grab (Ex): If Abu Hol hits an opponent smaller than it with a tentacle or bite attack it deals normal damage and attempts to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity. If it wins the grapple check, it establishes a hold and can either use rotting constriction (with a tentacle) or try to swallow the foe the following round (with a bite).

Nondetection (Su): Abu Hol resists detection, and is treated as if affected by a *nondetection* spell (CL 60th).

Regeneration (Ex): No form of attack deals lethal damage to the Abu Hol, and it cannot be truly slain by any force known to this reality. However, Abu Hol can be severely weakened by the spell *sigil of Naggath-Orguul*, a powerful and

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obscure arcane or divine spell that summons forth a mighty flaming sigil in the shape of a five-pointed star surrounding a flaming eye. In the presence of the sigil Abu Hol cannot regenerate, loses its spell resistance and damage reduction, and when it is reduced to 0 hit points (no small task in itself) it is banished back to its tomb in Hades.

Rotting Constriction (Ex): Once Abu Hol has hold of an opponent, each successful grapple check it makes during subsequent rounds permanently drains 2d4 points of Constitution. At the same time, Abu Hol regains 10 lost hit points.

Swallow Whole (Ex): Abu Hol can try to swallow a grabbed opponent of Huge or smaller size by making a successful grapple check. Once inside, the opponent must make a DC 80 Fortitude saving throw every round or be destroyed, utterly and irrevocably, by the terrible energies contained with the horrid abomination. Creatures destroyed in this manner are truly gone, and cannot be brought back to life by any means, at least by any known to this reality.

A swallowed creature can cut its way out by dealing 100 points of damage to Abu Hol's innards (AC 45). Once the creature exits, muscular action closes the hole; another swallowed opponent must cut its own way out.

Abu Hol's gullet can hold 2 Huge, 8 Large, 32 Medium, 128 Small, or 512 Tiny or smaller creatures. However, since victims are often utterly consumed, there is no limit to the amount of creatures Abu Hol can devour.

Background

Abu Hol is a remnant from a time when true madness and chaos ruled the multiverse. It is one of the lesser scions of a race of eldritch fiends that left this multiverse for the realms of outer darkness long ago. It now slumbers in a forgotten tomb on the plane of Hades, awakening only at the whim of powerful daemon lords who know the proper spells and rituals to control it.

In the beginning, the multiverse was a seething void of chaos, a hostile, yet fertile, firmament whereupon anything might take root and germinate. As the reality we now began to take shape, layering itself into the first primal planes of existence, what is now called Hades, and its direct opposite, Elysium, it attracted the attention of vast and alien minds from outside our reality.

These eldritch beings seeped down from ineffable realms of madness and claimed the barren, gloom-haunted wastes of Hades as their own. For eons untold these colossal entities ruled the multiverse uncontested, warring with one another on occasion for reasons mortal minds can only

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guess at. There is not written history of this primordial era, but later daemonic historians, especially the enigmatic Naggath-Orguul, describe a great cataclysm that drove these ancient beings back into the outer dark. Naggath-Orguul believed that this cataclysm was simply the further spread of the multiverse and the rise of other sentient creatures. As this reality took shape and grew, the elder fiends were forced to withdraw, as the bizarre, alien matter they were composed of became unstable in the growing wake of order, light, and reason.

Eventually, the elder fiends departed our reality *en masse*, leaving only those few that had become tainted by our reality, and therefore unable to leave. The race of daemons that inherited Hades learned where these few abandoned abomination slept, and found that they could harness their power. It was Naggath-Orguul, the one time advisor to Yaghur Hod, who discovered the secret of controlling these ancient beings, and it was he that designed the sigil that could bind them and render them tractable to the will of another.

Unfortunately, Naggath-Orguul was devoured by one of the slumbering entities, the thing that is now known as Abu Hol, or simply "The Beast," when he attempted to awaken it However, his master, the powerful Yaghur Hod, perfected his servant's method, and managed to yoke Abu Hol to his will. He used the great beast to assault Elysium, and later awakened it again when he sought to conquer the Abyss.

Although a lesser member of his terrible race, Abu Hol still ranks among the most powerful entities in the multiverse. So powerful is the slumbering behemoth that it has influenced the minds of mortals for thousands of years, as its terrible dreams of hunger and madness echo through the ether to reach certain receptive minds on the Prime Material Plane. This has allowed cults devoted to the ancient fiend to spring up in a number of cultures; however, those that choose to worship Abu Hol receive no benefit from it, as the Beast cannot grant spells. It was one of these horrid cults that gave the creature the name it is most often called by, Abu Hol, or the Father of Terror.

There are rumors that Abu Hol was awakened between Yaghur Hod's assault on Elysium and his recent freedom of the Guardinal's prison. A number of minor deities are reported to have been slain and devoured by a terrible beast fitting Abu Hol's description, and the terrible monster known as the tarrasque is purported to be a lesser offspring of the mighty

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fiend. The truth of these rumors is, however, in question, although there is enough circumstantial evidence to lend them some credence.

Strategies and Tactics

Only madness and death awaits anyone unfortunate enough to actually face Abu Hol in direct combat. There is nothing short of a greater god that can check The Beast's power, and it is truly immortal, proof against all threats this reality has to offer. Only the *sigil of Naggath-Orguul* can strip Abu Hol of a portion of its power, rendering it vulnerable to banishment back to Hades.

In its material from, that of the great, reptilian monstrosity, Abu Hol begins combat by charging and attempting to bite and swallow as many creatures as possible. If an opponent is simply too large to swallow, the elder fiend will dismember it asunder with tooth and claw for easier devouring. When forced into its true form, a vast tentacular mass that is utterly horrifying to look upon, Abu Hol will snatch up enemies with its tentacles and then drain them of vitality with its rotting constriction ability.

Abu Hol has no use of complex tactics, and will simply attack relentlessly until its opponent is dead and devoured, or it is banished. Only the appearance of the *sigil of Naggath-Orguul* forces it to pay any attention to a particular target, as it attempts to quickly destroy any creature casting the long and complicated spell.

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Sigil of Naggath-Orguul

Necromancy [Evil]
Level: Clr 9, Sor/Wiz 9
Components: V, S
Cost: 1d8 damage to all ability scores
Casting Time: 10 minutes
Range: 0 ft.; see text
Effect: One symbol
Duration: One minute/level
Saving Throw: None
Spell Resistance: No

This powerful spell summons forth a great blazing symbol in the shape of a five-pointed star surrounding a flaming eye. It can be nearly any size the caster wishes (from 5 to 50 feet in diameter) and hovers in front of him at a distance of 5 feet. The symbol affects only creatures with the abomination subtype, rendering them easier to damage and defeat. Any abomination within long range (400 ft. + 40 ft./caster level) that can see the sigil is affected by its power, and loses all spell resistance and damage reduction, and cannot regenerate or use fast healing.

Sigil of Naggath-Orguul is an exceedingly difficult and dangerous spell to cast. Upon completion of the spell, the caster suffers 1d8 points of ability damage to all ability scores. In addition, if the spell is interrupted during casting for any reason, the caster must make a DC 25 Fortitude save or suffer 2d8 points of ability damage to all ability scores.

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Beyemon, the Lord of the First

Only the darkest pits of the Hells could have spawned the malignant colossus that stand before you. Encased in a suit of sanguineous red armor, the fiend stands twenty feet tall, an ironclad behemoth of unholy might. But no armor hides its monstrous head. Its terrifying visage is all horns, dripping fangs, and baleful red eyes. Two great wings, heavy with scales, stretch from the fiend's back. A lashing tail, powerful and sinuous, stirs the dust behind the great monstrosity. It grips a gargantuan iron spear in both of its taloned hands, balanced over one Herculean shoulder. An aura of terror and truest evil surrounds the fiend, and the air seems to shimmer with power as it strides toward you.

Beyemon (CR 41)

Advanced Pit Fiend Blackguard 10

LE Huge Outsider (Evil, Extraplanar, Lawful)

Init +18; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., see in darkness; Listen +49, Spot +49

Languages Abyssal, Aquan, Auran, Celestial, Common, Draconic, Ignan, Infernal, Terran, Undercommon, telepathy 100 ft.

Aura terror (20 ft. radius, DC 44); despair (10 ft. radius, -2 to saving throws)

AC 57, touch 16, flatfooted 56 (-2 size, +1 Dex, +26 natural, +15 armor, +7 ring)

hp 844 (48 HD), regeneration 5; **DR** 15/epic, good and silver

Immune fire, poison

Resist acid 20, cold 10, sonic 50; **SR** 52

Fort +38, **Ref** +34, **Will** +34

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares) in +6 sonic warding full plate; base speed 50 ft.; fly 80 ft. (average)

Melee *Dreadskewer* +75/+70/+65/+60 (3d6+40 plus 4d6 against chaotic creatures plus 4d6 against chaotic outsiders plus against good-aligned creatures plus poison/×3) and bite +68 (8d6+11 plus poison plus disease) and 2 wings +68 (3d6+11) and tail slap +68 (3d8+11) or

Melee 2 claws +68 (3d8+22) and bite +68 (8d6+11 plus poison plus disease) and 2 wings +68 (3d6+11) and tail slap +68 (3d8+11)

Space 15 ft.; **Reach** 15 ft.

Base Atk +48; **Grapple** +78

Atk Options Cleave, Combat Expertise, Combat Reflexes, Great Cleave, Hover, Improved Sunder, Power Attack, constrict 3d8+33, improved grab, smite good 3/day (+10 attack, +10 damage)

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Special Actions Negative Energy Burst (DC 24), command undead 13/day (+12, 2d6+18), disease, poison, summon devil

Blackguard Spells Prepared (CL 10th)

4th – *cure critical wounds*, *freedom of movement*, *inflict critical wounds* (DC 22)

3rd – *contagion* (DC 21), *deeper darkness* (2), *protection from elements*

2nd – *bull's strength*, *death knell* (DC 20), *shatter* (DC 20) (2)

1st – *corrupt weapon*, *doom* (DC 19), *inflict light wounds* (DC 19) (2)

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 38th)

At will – *blasphemy* (DC 27), *create undead*, *fireball* (DC 23), *greater dispel magic*, *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only), *invisibility*, *magic circle against good*, *mass hold monster* (DC 29), *persistent image* (DC 25), *power word stun*, *unholy aura* (DC 28)

1/day – *meteor swarm* (DC 29)

1/year – *wish*

Abilities Str 55, Dex 22, Con 34, Int 28, Wis 26, Cha 30

SQ aura of evil, dark blessing, poison use

Feats Cleave, Combat Expertise, Combat Reflexes, Great Cleave, Hover, Improved Initiative, Improved Multiattack, Improved Natural Attack (bite), Improved Sunder, Iron Will, Multiattack, Power Attack, Quicken Spell-Like Ability (fireball)

Epic Feats Energy Resistance (acid), Improved Combat Reflexes, Negative Energy Burst, Unholy Strike

Skills Balance +8, Bluff +56, Climb +58, Concentration +51, Diplomacy +53, Disguise +41 (+43 acting), Hide +44, Intimidate +63, Jump +64, Knowledge (arcana) +50, Knowledge (the planes) +50, Knowledge (religion) +60, Listen +49, Move Silently +42, Search +55, Spellcraft +57, Spot +49, Survival +13 (+15 following tracks, +15 on other planes), Tumble +44

Possessions *Dreadskewer* (*+7 Gargantuan chaotic outsider dread spear of axiomatic power*), *+6 sonic warding full plate*, *ring of epic protection +7*

Aura of Terror (Su): Beyemon can radiate a 20-foot-radius aura as a free action. A creature in the area must succeed on a DC 44 Will save or be affected as though by a fear spell (caster level 38th). Creatures with less than 24 Hit Dice failing this save must make an additional DC 44 Fortitude save or die from fright. A creature that successfully saves cannot be affected again by Beyemon's aura for 24 hours. Only creatures of like status, such as archdevils, demon lords, etc., are immune to Beyemon's aura of terror.

Constrict (Ex): Beyemon deals 3d8+33 points of damage with a successful grapple check.

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Disease (Su): A creature struck by a Beyemon's bite attack must succeed on a DC 46 Fortitude save or be infected with a vile disease known as devil rot (incubation period 1 day, damage 1d10 Str, 1d10 Dex, 1d10 Con).

Improved Grab (Ex): To use this ability, Beyemon must hit with his tail slap attack. He can then attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity. If he wins the grapple check, he establishes a hold and can constrict.

Poison (Ex): Injury, Fortitude DC 46, initial damage 2d6 Con, secondary damage death.

Summon Devil (Sp): Twice per day Beyemon can automatically summon 10 lemures, bone devils, or bearded devils, or 4 erinyes, horned devils, or ice devils. This ability is the equivalent of a 9th-level spell.

Regeneration (Ex): Beyemon takes normal damage from epic good-aligned silvered weapons, and from spells or effects with the good descriptor.

Beyemon is an archdevil, the Lord of Avernus, first layer of the Nine Hells. He is tasked primarily with the command of a mighty infernal army, marshaled from the Hells to repel incursions from the Abyss.

Strategies & Tactics

Although capable of leveling cities with his powerful spell-like abilities, Beyemon prefers the visceral thrill of melee combat. Nevertheless, the Lord of the First is no reckless fool. He prepares for battle with a number of powerful spells designed to enhance his combat prowess. Typically, he casts the following spells in the order listed: unholy aura, freedom of movement, bull's strength, and corrupt weapon.

Against weaker opponents, such as lesser devils, demons, and adventurers, Beyemon largely relies on his aura of terror to thin the ranks of his foes. He has been known to wade into an Abyssal horde, against seemingly impossible odds, only to have his enemies die in droves around him, stricken by the lethal terror that shrouds the mighty archdevil.

Hardier foes must face the full brunt of Beyemon's unstoppable physical might. A veritable whirlwind of infernal destruction, the archdevil can devastate nearly any creature in the multiverse with his array of natural attacks, not to mention his god-like skill at arms. Recently, Beyemon has been associated with artifact Dreadskewer, a mighty demon-slaying spear, and he has sown much destruction and woe among his Abyssal enemies.

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History

In terms of influence, Beyemon holds what is perhaps the weakest of position of any archdevil. No ruler of Avernus has ever risen beyond Lord of the First, as the time-consuming duties of the position preclude all but the most basic political maneuvers. Beyemon spends nearly every moment repelling—or planning to repel—invasions into Hell's topmost layer. Be it a horde of marauding demons, infiltrating celestials, or mortal adventurers of epic power, Beyemon has his talons full without worrying about moving up the political ladder.

This does not mean, however, that Beyemon lacks ambition or the intellectual capacity necessary to advance himself, but he is checked at every turn by the other eight infernal lords. The archdevils are keenly aware that the ruler of Avernus must focus upon his duties as guardian of Hell's doorway, for the safety and security of the entire plane. In fact, the Lord of the First is in many ways immune to the Machiavellian intrigues of infernal society, but is closely watched by his peers, lest he falter in his very important role.

Beyemon gained his ranks and title by wresting them from the cold, dead talons of Avernus' previous ruler, Baal. Baal had lost a very important battle to a host of celestials, allowing the upper planar beings to establish a foothold on Avernus. For this failure, the remaining eight infernal rulers backed Beyemon, Baal's foremost general, in a bloody coup. The uprising ended with Baal's death and Beyemon's ascension to the rank of archdevil.

His first task as the new ruler of Avernus was to remove the entrenched celestials, which he accomplished in a brutal offensive that left not a single invader alive. Thus, the new archdevil cemented his reputation as a tactical genius, reassuring the remaining lords of Hell that they had the made the right choice.

But recently, Beyemon has lost favor with the other eight infernal rulers, due in large part to the activities of the demon lord Pyrak. The great bird-like demon has led a number of successful forays into Avernus, slaying thousands of infernal troops in the process. Pyrak even battled Beyemon in single combat, nearly slaying the archdevil.

Fortunately, Beyemon retains one formidable ally: the reigning monarch of Hell himself, Asmodeus. The great archdevil has loaned the fearsome artifact spear Dreadskewer to Beyemon, giving the ruler of Avernus the raw power necessary to slay Pyrak personally. The Lord of the First has no

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illusions about his standing: he knows killing this Abyssal rival is the only way he can redeem himself in the eyes of his peers

Servants & Enemies

Beyemon commands an infernal army over a million strong, composed primarily of legions of bearded and barbed devils. He is also served by eight powerful horned devils, each commanding one eighth of this massive army. These powerful fiends act as counselors and war captains, responsible for ensuring that Beyemon's orders are followed to the letter.

Beyemon has few true enemies in the infernal court. His position is considered the weakest of the nine rulers of Hell, and the other archdevils have nothing to gain from eroding his influence. Historically, he has largely been left to his own devices. Of late, however, his recent failures have caused all but Asmodeus to lose faith in his abilities.

Now, the Lord of the First fears another coup much like his own. The abyssal ruler Pyrak is Beyemon's nemesis, and lately all of his considerable power has been spent on fighting off the demon lord's incessant incursions.

Beyemon has few mortal worshipers. For the most part, he does not seek out followers on the Prime Material plane. However, a small number of mortals do worship him, and they are incredibly militant and warlike. The members of the cult of Beyemon often hire themselves out as very capable, if ruthless, mercenaries. Despite their evil inclinations, these aggressive cultists can be expected to fulfill their contracted duties to the letter.

Clerics worshiping Beyemon receive access to the following domains: Evil, Law, Protection, and War. Beyemon's favored weapon is the falchion.

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Gemnez the Horned Devil

The ground shakes as this massive, bloated fiend strides into view. The behemoth is a staggering 20 feet tall and nearly as broad. Mound upon mound of soft, doughy flesh droops from the titanic frame of the fiend, and its body quivers gelatinously as it moves. A great round, reptilian head sets upon the fiend's neck, a scaled nightmare of gleaming red eyes and bristling fangs. The terror of the beast's visage is somewhat offset by the garish, slapdash coating of rouge, bright red lip paint, and heavy, blue eye coloring that coats its face. It wears nothing but a giant length of spiked chain around its waist, all but hidden in the vast layers of fat around its middle.

Gemnez (CR 32)

Unique Horned Devil Monk 15

LE Huge Outsider (Evil, Extraplanar, Lawful)

Init +9; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., see in darkness; Listen +49, Spot +49

Languages Abyssal, Aquan, Auran, Celestial, Common, Draconic, Ignan, Infernal, Terran, Undercommon, telepathy 100 ft.

Aura fear (5 ft., DC 39)

AC 44, touch 22, flatfooted 39 (-2 size, +5 Dex, +6 Wis, +3 monk, +22 natural)

hp 568 (40 HD), regeneration 5; **DR** 15/good and silver

Immune fire, normal disease, poison

Resist acid 10, cold 10, improved evasion, evasion; SR 38

Fort +32, **Ref** +28, **Will** +31 (+2 bonus vs. enchantment spells)

Speed 70 ft. (14 squares); fly 50 ft. (average)

Melee unarmed strike +49/+49/+49/+44/+39/+34 (4d6+15) and tail +47 (3d6+7 plus infernal wound) plus bite +47 (3d8+7) or

Melee *+3 axiomatic spiked chain* +53/+53/+53/+48/+43/+38 (3d6+25 plus stun plus 2d6 against chaotic creatures) and tail +47 (3d6+7 plus infernal wound) plus bite +47 (3d8+7)

Space 15 ft.; **Reach** 15 ft. (25 ft. with spiked chain)

Base Atk +36; **Grapple** +63

Atk Options Awesome Blow, Cleave, Combat Expertise, Combat Reflexes, Deflect Arrows, Improved Bull Rush, Improved Disarm, Improved Sunder, Improved Trip, Power Attack, Stunning Fist (15/day, DC 26), abundant step 1/day, ki strike (magic, lawful)

Special Actions infernal wound, summon devil, quivering palm 1/week (DC 23), wholeness of body (30 points)

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Spell-Like Abilities (CL 25th)

At will – *dispel chaos* (DC 24), *dispel good* (DC 24), *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only), *magic circle against good*, *persistent image* (DC 24)

3/day – *fireball* (DC 22), *lightning bolt* (DC 22)

Abilities Str 40, Dex 20, Con 28, Int 26, Wis 22, Cha 28

SQ diamond body, diamond soul, fast movement, slow fall 70 ft., purity of body, still mind,

Feats Awesome Blow, Cleave, Combat Expertise, Combat Reflexes[B], Deflect Arrows, Improved Bull Rush, Improved Disarm, Improved Grapple, Improved Initiative, Improved Sunder, Improved Trip[B], Iron Will, Multiattack, Negotiator, Persuasive, Power Attack, Stunning Fist[B], Weapon Focus (spiked chain)

Skills Balance +7, Bluff +39, Climb +43, Concentration +52, Diplomacy +58, Disguise +39 (41 acting), Gather Information +37, Hide +40, Intimidate +40, Knowledge (arcana) +51, Jump +48, Knowledge (the planes) +36, Knowledge (religion) +23, Listen +49, Move Silently +48, Perform (oratory) +24, Search +36, Sense Motive +51, Spot +49, Survival +34 (+36 following tracks, +36 on other planes), Tumble +22

Possessions *+3 axiomatic spiked chain*

Fear Aura (Su): Gemnez can radiate a 5-foot-radius fear aura as a free action. A creature in the area must succeed on a DC 39 Will save or be affected as though by a fear spell (caster level 25th). A creature that successfully saves cannot be affected again by Gemnez's fear aura for 24 hours. Other devils are immune to the aura.

Stun (Su): Whenever Gemnez hits with a spiked chain attack, the opponent must succeed on a DC 45 Fortitude save or be stunned for 1d4 rounds. This ability is a function of the horned devil himself, not of the spiked chain.

Infernal Wound (Su): The damage Gemnez deals with his tail attack causes a persistent wound. An injured creature loses 2 additional hit points each round. The wound does not heal naturally and resists healing spells. The continuing hit point loss can be stopped by a DC 39 Heal check, a cure spell, or a heal spell. However, a character attempting to cast a cure spell or a heal spell on a creature damaged by a Gemnez's tail must succeed on a DC 39 caster level check, or the spell has no effect on the injured character. A successful Heal check automatically stops the continuing damage as well as restoring hit points.

Summon Devil (Sp): Once per day Gemnez can attempt to summon 2d10 lemures or 1d6 bearded devils with a 50% chance of success, 1d6 barbed devils with a 35% chance of success, or another horned devil with a 20% chance of success.

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This ability is the equivalent of a 6th-level spell.

Regeneration (Ex): Gemnez takes normal damage from good-aligned silvered weapons, and from spells or effects with the good descriptor.

Gemnez is a rogue horned devil, once a favored servant of Beyemon, and now a pariah in the service to his former master's most hated enemy.

Background

A truly unique being, Gemnez is a rogue devil who has forsaken the rigid, grinding politics of the Nine Hells for the chaotic maelstrom of the Abyss. This powerful fiend was well on his way to becoming an archdevil before he betrayed his former master and swore allegiance to a powerful enemy of the Nine Hells – the demon lord, Pyrak.

Gemnez differs from his infernal brethren in a number of ways. His body is caught halfway between his original form – a horned devil – and the unique body of an archdevil. His transformation was stalled midway when he gave up his rank and position in the infernal hierarchy to enter into the service of Pyrak and the Abyss. Gemnez's strange body is a bizarre mixture of horned devil and something far more powerful. His bloated, corpulent form is drastically different from the sleek, muscular power of the cornugon, and the bizarre markings on his face, looking for all the world like a harlot's face paint, are actually part of his natural coloration, and are not applied cosmetics. Gemnez still retains most of the powers he commanded as a horned devil, including his expertise with a massive spiked chain.

Gemnez also differs from other inhabitants of the Nine Hells in his temperament and outlook on existence in general. Deeply reflective and philosophically inclined, Gemnez, like many of the fiends drawn to Pyrak's service, has grown beyond the confining ethical outlook deeply ingrained in evil outsiders, and has rejected much of the ideology common to infernal creatures. Gemnez's contemplative disposition has softened his evil inclinations, and he has pursued a path to power that focuses on inner strength, and the further development of his understanding of the multiverse and his place within it. But Gemnez can be just as calculating and manipulative as any devil, and in fact, his rejection of rigid infernal dogma grants him much more leeway in playing his enemies against one another.

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Strategy and Tactics

Despite his great power, Gemnez would rather talk than fight, and usually seeks a bloodless solution to potentially violent conflicts. This has nothing to do with any ethical disdain for violence; Gemnez simply seeks to gain yet another ally and potential source of information to add to his vast network of planar informants and spies. The great horned devil's incredible skill at diplomacy and even outright intimidation means he can usually defeat all but the most powerful (or stubborn) foes without ever lifting a talon.

However, sometimes violence is inevitable, and Gemnez is more than capable of defending himself when the need arises. A powerful monk, the massive horned devil can move with incredible speed despite his ungainly appearance. Gemnez's massive fists strike like great scaly battering rams, and he can smash even powerful fiends to pulp with little difficulty. In addition, Gemnez can use his spiked chain in conjunction with his flurry of blows ability, shredding and entangling his foes in a whirlwind of sharpened steel.

Gemnez rarely uses his spell-like abilities, considering them even more gauche and uncouth than physical violence. He does, however, occasionally use *persistent image* to confuse his opponents, usually by creating duplicates of himself to draw enemy attacks.

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Grimclaw, Dreadwing Commander

This great, feathered demon is a hulking example of its particular breed of fiend. It stands a lofty 12 feet tall, and its body is solid and massive. The demon's feathers are a vivid cobalt blue, while its beak and talons are matte black. The fiend wears a shirt of black, studded leather over its torso and grips a gigantic morningstar in both of its taloned hands. The black stave of a great longbow protrudes over the demon's left shoulder, and a quiver bristling with huge, red and blue-feathered arrows hangs at its side.

Grimclaw (CR 21)

Vrock Ranger 11

CN Large Outsider (Chaotic, Evil, Extraplanar)

Init +3; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft; Listen +36, Spot +36

Language Abyssal, Common, Infernal, telepathy 100 ft.

AC 29, touch 12, flat-footed 26 (-1 size, +3 Dex, +11 natural, +6 armor)

hp 298 (21 HD); **DR** 10/good

Immune electricity, poison

Resist acid 10, cold 10, fire 10, evasion; SR 17

Fort +23, **Ref** +17, **Will** +15

Speed 30 ft. (6 squares), fly 80 ft. (good)

Melee *+2 speed devil bane two-handed morningstar* +30/+30/+25/+20/+15 (3d6+14 plus 2d6 against devils/×3) and bite +23 melee (1d8+4) and 2 talons +23 melee (1d6+4)

Ranged *+2 devil bane composite longbow* [Str +8] +25/+20/+15/+10 (2d6+10 plus 2d6 against devils/×3) or

Ranged *+2 devil bane composite longbow* [Str +8] +23/+23/+18/+13/+8 (2d6+10 plus 2d6 against devils/×3) or

Ranged *+2 devil bane composite longbow* [Str +8] +17 (8d6+40 plus 8d6 against devils/×3)

Space 10 ft.; **Reach** 10 ft.

Base Atk +21; **Grp** +33

Atk Options Cleave, Flyby Attack, Great Cleave, Improved Precise Shot, Many Shot, Point Blank Shot, Power Attack, Precise Shot, Rapid Shot, favored enemy lawful outsiders +6, favored enemies (evil outsiders +2, chaotic outsiders +2)

Special Actions dance of ruin, spores, stunning screech, summon demon

Ranger Spells Prepared (CL 5th)

3rd – *greater magic fang*

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2nd – *barkskin*, *protection from energy*

1st – *jump*, *longstrider*, *read magic*

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 12th)

At will - *mirror image*, *telekinesis* (DC 19), *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only);

1/day – *heroism*

Abilities Str 26, Dex 16, Con 28, Int 16, Wis 21, Cha 18

SQ combat style (archery), combat style mastery (archery), improved combat style (archery), swift tracker, wild empathy +15, woodland stride

Feats Cleave, Endurance[B], Flyby Attack, Great Cleave, Hover, Improved Precise Shot[B], Manyshot[B], Point Blank Shot, Power Attack, Precise Shot, Rapid Shot[B], Track[B]

Skills Concentration +32, Diplomacy +6, Hide +22, Intimidate +17, Jump +18, Knowledge (geography) +13, Knowledge (the planes) +16, Listen +36, Move Silently +26, Search +26, Sense Motive +18, Spellcraft +16, Spot +36, Survival +28 (+30 following tracks, +30 on other planes, +30 to avoid getting lost)

Possessions *+2 speed devil bane two-handed morningstar*, *+2 devil bane composite longbow* [Str +8], 20 *+1 flaming arrows*, 20 *+1 frost arrows*, *+4 studded leather*

Dance of Ruin (Su): To use this ability, Grimclaw and at least two other vrocks must join hands in a circle, dancing wildly and chanting. At the end of 3 rounds of dancing, a wave of crackling energy flashes outward in a 100-foot radius. All creatures except for demons within the radius take 20d6 points of damage (Reflex DC 18 half). Stunning, paralyzing, or slaying one vrock stops the dance.

Spores (Ex): Grimclaw can release masses of spores from its body once every 3 rounds as a free action. The spores automatically deal 1d8 points of damage to all creatures adjacent to the vrock ranger. They then penetrate the skin and grow, dealing an additional 1d4 points of damage each round for 10 rounds. At the end of this time, the victim is covered with a tangle of viny growths. (The vines are harmless and wither away in 1d4 days.) A delay poison spell stops the spores' growth for its duration. Bless, neutralize poison, or remove disease kills the spores, as does sprinkling the victim with a vial of holy water.

Stunning Screech (Su): Once per hour Grimclaw can emit a piercing screech. All creatures except for demons within a 30-foot radius must succeed on a DC 29 Fortitude save or be stunned for 1 round.

Summon Demon (Sp): Once per day Grimclaw can attempt to summon 2d10 dretches or another vrock with a 35% chance of success. This ability is the equivalent of a 3rd-level spell.

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Grimclaw is a powerful vrock in the service of the demon lord Pyrak. He leads the demon lord's force of elite vrocks, known as the Dreadwings.

Background

Grimclaw is that rarest of fiends, a demon that has grown beyond the binding shackles of his own nature. The great vrock has left behind the evil that pervades the souls of all demons, and replaced it with a stoic honor and a fierce loyalty to his master. Grimclaw is still quite chaotic, however, and can be cruel and vindictive. But he lacks the slavish devotion to malice that infests the minds of all demons and has shown flashes of truly selfless behavior, and even kindness.

An anomalous demon himself, Pyrak saw the worth in Grimclaw's odd devotion and grounded temperament, and appointed him to the position of leader of the Dreadwings. A formidable warrior and tracker, Grimclaw eagerly joined his master's crusade against the devils, and next to Pyrak himself, is one of the most feared demons by the inhabitants of the Nine Hells.

Like his master, Grimclaw has the ability to engender true loyalty even in the chaotic ranks of demon-kind, and his vrocks show an unprecedented respect for their leader. But even such a demon as Grimclaw must fight to keep his position in the tenuous chaos of the Abyss, and he has slain dozens of would-be usurpers to his title.

Strategy and Tactics

A far more able flyer than most vrocks, Grimclaw prefers to attack from the air, using his aerial superiority to confuse and harry his enemies. Against land-bound opponents, Grimclaw simply hovers out of reach and picks off his targets with his great enchanted bow. Airborne foes he engages in melee, smashing his enemies with his massive morningstar and ripping them to shreds with his beak and talons. Grimclaw makes heavy use of both the Hover and Flyby Attack feats when engaging aerial opponents, trusting that his command of winged combat will prove the deciding factor against other flying fiends.

If Grimclaw is expecting combat, he uses his ranger spells and spell-like abilities to bolster his offensive and defensive capabilities before engaging his foes. His typical pre-combat spells are barkskin and greater magic fang, followed by mirror image and protection from energy, if there is time.

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Grimclaw is also adept at commanding his Dreadwings, and can occasionally force the intensely chaotic vrocks to utilize a number of complex tactics and stratagems. His success in the conflict with the Nine Hells hinges on his firm control over the Dreadwings, and he has surprised many infernal foes expecting simple mob tactics with brilliant and well-coordinated battlefield maneuvers.

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Hazergal Redfist, Mortal Wizard King

The man before you wears a deep crimson robe, embroidered with eerie, twisting runes and belted at the waist with a black sash. His face is deeply lined, and his eyes, a bright icy blue, seem to bear a great weight, something much heavier than simple age. The majority of the man's features are hidden behind a short beard and long, straight hair, both the color of dark earth, rich and brown. He grips a smooth ebony staff, plain and unadorned, and wears a curved dagger in a silver sheath at his waist.

Hazergal Redfist (CR 35)

Male Human Wizard 25/Cosmic Descryer 10
CE Medium Humanoid (Human)
Init +6; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., detect magic, see invisibility; Listen +2, Spot +2
Languages Abyssal, Celestial, Common, Draconic, Infernal, Undercommon, comprehend languages, read magic

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AC 33, touch 21, flatfooted 27 (+6 Dex, +12 bracers, +5 ring)
hp 126 (35 HD); DR 5/adamanitine
Resist acid 5, cold 5, fire 5, electricity 5; SR 15
Fort +15, **Ref** +20, **Will** +22

Speed 30 ft. (6 squares)
Melee *staff of planar might* +24/+19 (1d6+6 plus 2d6 against evil outsiders) or
Melee *+2 cold iron dagger* +20/+15 (1d4+3/19-20)
Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.
Base Atk +18; **Grapple** +19
Special Actions cosmic connection 3/day, enduring gate
Combat Gear *wand of expeditious retreat* (CL 1st, 26 charges), *scroll of summon monster IX* (CL 30th) (4), *potion of cure serious wounds* (CL 9th) (2)
Wizard Spells Prepared (CL 30th)

Epic Spells – *crown of vermin* (DC 36), *superb dispelling*, *verdigris* (DC 36)
10th – *meteor swarm* (empowered), *power word stun* (quickened)
9th – *gate*, *delayed blast fireball* (empowered, maximized) (DC 29), *summon monster IX* (2), *time stop*
8th – *chain lightning* (empowered, maximized) (DC 28), *greater planar binding*, *incendiary cloud* (DC 32), *mass charm monster* (DC 30), *summon monster VIII*
7th – *cone of cold* (empowered, maximized) (DC 27), *greater teleport*, *plane shift*, *spell turning*, *summon monster VII*, *wall of force* (quickened)
6th – *acid fog* (DC 30) (2), *chain lightning* (DC 28), *greater dispel magic* (2),

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planar binding

5th – *cloud kill* (DC 29) (2), *cone of cold* (DC 27), *feeblemind* (DC 27), *hold monster* (2) (DC 27)

4th – *bestow curse* (DC 26), *black tentacles* (2), *dimension door* (2), *scorching ray* (maximized, empowered), *solid fog*

3rd (quickened) – *fireball* (2) (DC 25), *magic missile* (empowered, maximized) (4), *stinking cloud* (2) (DC 27), *summon monster III* (2), *vampiric touch* (DC 25)

2nd (quickened) – *acid arrow* (2), *hideous laughter* (DC 24), *mirror image*, *scorching ray*, *summon swarm*, *web* (DC 26)

1st (quickened) – *feather fall*, *grease* (DC 25), *ray of enfeeblement* (2), *protection from evil*, *true strike* (2)

0 (quickened) – *acid splash*, *daze* (DC 22), *mage hand* (2)

Abilities Str 13, Dex 22, Con 12, Int 34, Wis 14, Cha 12

SQ naturalization, permanent spells, superior planar summoning

Feats Augment Summoning, Craft Staff, Craft Wondrous Item, Empower Spell[B], Forge Ring, Greater Spell Focus (conjuration), Greater Spell Penetration, Extend Spell[B], Maximize Spell[B], Quicken Spell[B], Scribe Scroll[B], Spell Focus (conjuration), Spell Penetration

Epic Feats Automatic Quicken Spell[B], Craft Epic Staff, Energy Resistance (fire), Epic Spellcasting, Improved Metamagic (2), Improved Spell Capacity

Skills Appraise +12 (+14 potions), Bluff +13, Concentration +39, Craft (alchemy) +32, Decipher Script +39, Diplomacy +14, Disguise +1 (+3 acting), Intimidate +3, Knowledge (arcana) +50, Knowledge (history) +40, Knowledge (religion) +40, Knowledge (the planes) +50, Spellcraft +52, Survival +2 (+4 on other planes)

Possessions *staff of planar might* (*+5 evil outsider bane quarterstaff*), *+2 cold iron dagger*, *headband of epic intellect +8*, *bracers of epic armor +10*, *ring of protection +5*, *ring of wizardry IV*, *Hazergal's Red Robe of Invulnerability*, *gloves of Dexterity +6*

Cosmic Connection (Su): Hazergal may join with the energy of the multiverse three times per day. Hazergal can remain connected for up to 35 minutes. While connected, he is immune to critical hits, is a native on any plane he visits, and can use *dimension door* at will as a 20th-level caster. Hazergal can draw off excess energy from the multiverse itself to increase his effective caster level or enhance any attack roll, saving throw, skill check, or ability check. Drawing off excess energy from the multiverse is dangerous, and it deals Hazergal 5 points of damage for each +1 bonus applied to a single roll or +1 caster level on a single spell.

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Enduring Gate (Su): As a full-round action, Hazergal can make any casting of the *gate* spell remain for three full days, rather than disappearing after 1 round per caster level.

Naturalization (Ex): Hazergal has developed a natural affinity for a number of planes he has visited, and has become resistant to spells and spell-like effects that would normally affect any creature not native to that plane. Hazergal has achieved naturalization for the following planes: The Abyss, The Nine Hells, The Elemental Plane of Fire, The Astral Plane, and Gehenna.

Permanent Spells (Su): Hazergal has made the following spells permanent upon his person: *comprehend languages*, *darkvision*, *detect magic*, *read magic*, and *see invisibility*.

Superior Planar Summoning (Ex): Hazergal can increase the power of any of the following spells – *elemental swarm*, *gate*, *greater planar ally*, *greater planar binding*, *summon monster IX* – to affect or summon outsiders of 12 Hit Dice higher than the spell's normal limit or conjure creatures with 12 Hit Dice of advancement. Hazergal commonly summons a 36 Hit Die Gargantuan fiendish monstrous scorpion when casting *summon monster IX*. He has repeatedly bound a truly terrible 30 Hit Die elite bebilith named Chyrkazz (stats below) into his service via the *greater planar binding* spell.

Hazergal's Red Robe of Invulnerability

This crimson robe is embroidered with strange twisting black runes that seem to shine with a gloomy radiance. The robe grants incredible protective qualities to its wearer, making even the feeblest mage a match for any spell or blade brought to bear on him. While worn, *Hazergal's Red Robe of Invulnerability* grants the following constant effects:

- Damage reduction 5/adamantine
- +1 resistance bonus to all saving throws
- Resistance to acid 5, cold 5, fire 5, and electricity 5
- Spell resistance 15

However, channeling spell energy directly into the robe can increase the potency of the abilities above. A spellcaster can increase the numerical value of any of the above resistances as a standard action by sacrificing a memorized arcane spell or a daily casting (if a sorcerer). Each of the numerical values can be raised by one point per spell level channeled into it. For example, if a wizard wanted to increase his damage reduction, he could channel a 9th-level spell into the robe and gain damage reduction of 14/adamanitine. The increased potency

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lasts for one minute per spellcaster level, and each resistance may be charged in this manner only once per day (each energy resistance counts as a separate resistance for this purpose).

Strong Abjuration; CL 18th; Craft Wondrous Item, Empower Spell, *protection from energy*, *resistance*, *spell resistance*, *stoneskin*; Price 110,500 gp; Weight 1 lb.

Chyrkazz (CR 18)

Advanced Elite Bebilith
CE Gargantuan Outsider (Chaotic, Extraplanar, Evil)
Init +8; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., scent; Listen +34, Spot +34
Languages telepathy 100 ft.

AC 27, touch 10, flat-footed 23 (-4 size, +4 Dex, +17 natural)
hp 492 (30 HD); **DR** 10/good
Fort +29, **Ref** +21, **Will** +18

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares), climb 20 ft.
Melee bite +41 (4d6+15 plus poison/19-20) and 2 claws +39 (3d6+7)
Ranged web +30 ranged (special)
Space 20 ft.; **Reach** 15 ft.
Base Atk +30; **Grapple** +61
Atk Options Cleave, Great Cleave, Power Attack, rend armor 6d6+22, poison
Special Actions plane shift

Abilities Str 40, Dex 18, Con 34, Int 14, Wis 12, Cha 11
Feats Ability Focus (poison), Cleave, Great Cleave, Improved Critical (bite), Improved Initiative, Improved Grapple, Improved Natural Attack (bite), Improved Natural Attack (claw), Multiattack, Power Attack, Track
Skills Climb +56, Diplomacy +35, Hide +33, Jump +52, Listen +34, Move Silently +37, Search +34, Sense Motive +34, Spot +34, Survival +34 (+36 following tracks)

Poison (Ex): Injury, Fortitude DC 39, initial damage 1d6 Con, secondary damage 2d6 Con. Bebilith venom is highly perishable, losing its potency and becoming inert, foul-smelling goo almost as soon as it comes into contact with air.

Rend Armor (Ex): If Chyrkazz hits with both claw attacks, it pulls apart any armor worn by its foe. This attack deals 6d6+22 points of damage to the opponent's armor. Creatures not wearing armor are unaffected by this special attack. Armor reduced to 0 hit points is destroyed. Damaged armor may be repaired with a successful Craft (armorsmithing) check.

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Web (Ex): Chyrkazz can throw a web up to four times per day. This is similar to an attack with a net but has a maximum range of 30 feet, with a range increment of 10 feet. This attack is effective against targets of any size. The web anchors the target in place, allowing no movement.

An entangled creature can escape with a DC 37 Escape Artist check or burst the web with a DC 37 Strength check. The web has 14 hit points and hardness 0. There is a 75% chance that the webbing will not burn if any sort of fire is applied to it (check each round).

Plane Shift (Su): This ability affects only Chyrkazz. It is otherwise similar to the spell (caster level 12th).

Hazergal Redfist was perhaps the most powerful mage in the great empire of Othregard. Before his death at the hands of a trusted lieutenant, he commanded a vast army of humanoids, demons, and other fell beasts, ruling much of the known world as a brutal tyrant.

Background

Hazergal Redfist was born in the vast metropolis of Dedrish, the capital city of the vast Othregardian Empire, to a pleasure slave owned by a low-ranking noble. As was common practice in Dedrish, children of slaves became the property of their owners. However, Hazergal was a sickly babe, and his mother's master, seeing no benefit in keeping the infant, sold Hazergal to a local workhouse.

No simple orphanage, the workhouse where Hazergal spent his early years bought infants and children, provided them with a few meager necessities, and then sold the them once they entered their preteens in Dedrish's booming slave market. The relentless brutality of the workhouse ensured that many children died of malnutrition or even at the hands of their fellow orphans long before they reached the age at which they could be sold. Hazergal, being physically unimpressive, survived the horror of the workhouse with the only asset he had – his intellect.

In his first ten years at the workhouse, Hazergal manipulated, connived, and generally outthought all of his rivals and enemies. At the same time, he made strides to impress the adult overseers of the workhouse with his intelligence, hoping that when the time came, he would be sold as an apprentice to a scribe or other learned professional rather than doomed to a short life of horrific labor in the diamond mines.

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The mighty wheels of Hazergal's destiny began their inevitable rotation early in his eleventh year. A powerful and kind-hearted wizard named Othos Pernazzon had long made a habit of choosing his apprentices from the less-fortunate children in Dedrish. His visit to the workhouse where Hazergal lived was exactly the opportunity the young orphan had been hoping for. Hazergal's keen intellect and driving ambition made him a perfect choice for an apprenticeship to the notable Othos Pernazzon, but the master of the house had different ideas.

Another youth, nearly as bright as Hazergal, was offered to Othos for an apprenticeship. This infuriated Hazergal, but his destiny would not be denied. The ill fortunes that would one day guide the sickly, eleven-year old orphan to the pinnacle of power made known their influence for the first time.

The boy chosen as Othos' apprentice had a connection to Hazergal that neither boy knew – they were brothers, born to the same pleasure slave a year apart, and sold to the workhouse. Hazergal and his brother, while not identical, looked very much alike, right down to the color of their hair and eyes. This fortuitous circumstance allowed the evil that had lain dormant in Hazergal to awaken and work its dark influence on the boy.

Othos left the workhouse to make his home ready for his new apprentice with the promise of returning in one day to claim him. This allowed Hazergal all the time he needed. That night as the orphans slept in their lice-ridden pallets, Hazergal slew his brother, cracking his skull with a sharp, heavy stone. He then dragged the body away, avoiding detection by the inattentive adults tasked with guarding the sleeping orphans, and dumped his brother's corpse into the massive sewer system that ran beneath the city of Dedrish. Hazergal then returned to his brother's pallet, cleaned up the blood, and settled into his sibling's place.

Hazergal's murderous plan worked to perfection, and the next day he was taken from the decrepit slavery of the workhouse and ushered into a life of comfort, studious challenge, and unlimited potential.

Hazergal's first year as apprentice to Othos Pernazzon would be the happiest in all his long life. His intellect, long starved of stimulation, devoured all of the knowledge and guidance the Othos provided. In addition, Hazergal's natural proclivity with magic had him casting cantrips and simple spells at the end of his first year, marking him the youngest of Othos' many apprentices to do so. In the following years, Hazergal continued to grow in

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power, and for the most part followed similar paths of magic study as his master. Othos was a conjurer, and was considered to be one of the most powerful mages in Dedrish. The elemental planes were Othos' primary area of expertise, and he often summoned elemental creatures to aid him in his studies. A good and kindly man, Othos avoided any contact with the lower planes and warned his apprentice to do the same. The old mage instructed Hazergal that the fell inhabitants of the nether worlds were conniving, manipulative, and nearly impossible to control, but despite his master's stern warnings, Hazergal was drawn to the study of dark magic.

Hazergal summoned his first demon at the age of seventeen. It was a heady rush to control such a powerful creature, but Hazergal, young as he was, allowed the demon to see his ambition and craving for power. The demon, a succubus, whispered honeyed words into Hazergal's soul, promising power, riches, and even the pleasures of the flesh. Hazergal was drawn in by these promises, and as he grew in power, the demon's influence grew over him. Finally, at the age of twenty-one, Hazergal tired of keeping his dark secret from his master. Filled with the false promises of the demon and confident in his growing power, Hazergal approached Othos and demanded that the mage hand over all of the knowledge he had gained regarding planar summoning.

Othos, horrified by the dark and twisted thing his apprentice had become, attempted to reason with the power-hungry young wizard, but Hazergal would not hear him. Despite the years of loving guidance Othos had so willingly imparted to his apprentice, he could not turn him away from his evil ambitions. Seeing what Hazergal had become, and knowing that the young mage would grow into a terrible force in the world, Othos attempted to destroy Hazergal.

Hazergal had expected his master to turn on him, and guided by his demonic patron, he has prepared for the inevitable battle with Othos. Hazergal has subtly marred the summoning circle Othos used to bind elemental creatures to his will. The imperfection was nearly invisible, but it negated the confining magic of the circle, so that any creature summoned into it would have free will to do as it pleased.

The battle between master and apprentice took place in Othos's laboratory, and as Hazergal expected, the first spell his master cast summoned a massive fire elemental into the laboratory's thaumaturgic circle. Thinking that the great fire elemental was under his command,

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Othos ordered the beast to destroy Hazergal, but instead, emboldened by the failed magical circle, the elemental turned on its summoner.

Caught unaware by the summoned elemental, Othos was struck down, and his laboratory and home were set alight by the maddened elemental. Hazergal barely escaped with his life, and in the ensuing chaos fled the city, heading for the wilds of northern Othregard.

At the time of Hazergal's flight from Dedrish, the citizens of the empire largely avoided the wild lands of the north. The rugged, hilly country was infested with foul humanoids, primarily gnolls that preyed upon anyone foolish enough to enter their territories. A number of powerful warlords and wizards had attempted to yoke the powerful humanoid tribes to their will, but all failed. Most were eventually destroyed by the gnolls, bugbears, and orcs they sought to lead, or were simply annihilated in conflicts with the established powers of the Othregardian Empire.

Hazergal sought refuge from the murder of Othos Pernazzon and his own personal demons of doubt and despair in a ruined tower, once the abode of an ancient sorcerer reputed to have been in league with demons and other nefarious lower planar entities. Hazergal found the long-dead sorcerer's summoning circle in a hidden chamber beneath the tower untouched and perfect, ready to channel the malign energies of dark summoning.

It was here that Hazergal began to build his empire. With the aid of powerful summoned creatures he began to gather the tribes of gnolls and other humanoids in the area and bind them to his will. Unable to resist the powerful wizard and his lower planar allies, the humanoid tribes either pledged themselves to Hazergal or were utterly destroyed. Soon, the budding tyrant commanded a small army of humanoids and soon turned this chaotic mob to raiding and looting more civilized areas of the empire, causing gold and other valuables to flow into his coffers.

Years passed, and Hazergal continued to grow in power. His army of humanoids grew as well, and eventually this bought him into direct conflict with the Dukes of Othregard, the seven ruling nobles that guided the course of the Empire. The first conflicts were mere skirmishes, clashes with small groups of Othregardian soldiers along the borders of the lands Hazergal had claimed. The wizard's humanoids emerged victorious in these initial battles, due in large part to their superior numbers. But Hazergal had yet to see the true might of the Othregardian Dukes, and his first major engagement with the army of Duke Issus Brighthammer ended in

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complete and total defeat.

Issus Brighthammer, known as the Iron Hand of Othregard, decimated Hazergal's humanoid army with the sterling precision of his own troops. Discipline and superior leadership allowed the Duke to rout Hazergal's force, despite its superior numbers. Only the summoning of a great demon, at much personal cost to Hazergal himself, allowed the tyrant mage to stop Duke Issus' advance on his territory. But despite the delay, the Duke's forces rallied once the demon was returned to its own plane and began to lay siege to Hazergal's tower.

Duke Issus would have very likely crushed Hazergal, but again, the malign forces that controlled the mage's destiny interceded. Another Duke, Rizak Stonehelm, chose the siege of Hazergal's tower as the occasion to launch a long-planned coup against his rival, Duke Issus. With his army distracted by the siege and weakened from earlier conflicts with Hazergal's humanoid army, the Duke was caught completely by surprise when Rizak's own army suddenly appeared and attacked. Caught between the tower and the army of his rival, Duke Issus was overwhelmed, his army broken and scattered, and his own death assured. The ensuing political chaos caused by Rizak's coup allowed the evil wizard time to rebuild his army. It was then that Hazergal discovered the one who would usher in his ultimate triumph—and his utter destruction.

Azadan Utherion, a mercenary from the war-like nation of Kalvan, entered Hazergal's service shortly after the failed siege of Duke Issus. An exile from his own land, Azadan brought with him much of the tactical knowledge garnered from his years of service in the Kalvanian military. This he coupled with a grasp of military organization that bordered on the supernatural, and he soon made himself known to Hazergal as a military leader without peer. With Hazergal's blessing Azadan took control of the wizard's army, broke it to his will, and transformed what was once a chaotic mob of individuals into the finest fighting force the world had ever seen. Azadan was able to inspire true respect and admiration in his charges, even among the bestial humanoids. It was this talent that led Hazergal's army to victory after victory, and all the while they grew in size, precision, and tactical superiority.

Soon Hazergal commanded a force powerful enough to challenge the combined might of the seven Dukes of Othregard for the rule of the empire. This epic battle took place on the great plains of Kresch, just outside the

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capital city of Dedrish. The arrayed troops of the Dukes numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and Hazergal's own army was nearly half that size but bolstered by powerful giants, monsters, and demons.

The battle raged for days. In the end, Hazergal's powerful spells and summoned horrors, together with Azadan's tactical genius, devastated the Dukes of Othregard and their army, leaving nothing but mounds of corpses for hungry demons and other monstrosities to feast upon. The Empire of Othregard was broken, brought to its knees by a onetime orphan and an exiled mercenary.

With Othregard at his disposal, Hazergal played the tyrant, and soon brought the entire nation under his iron rule. He ruled through fear and intimidation, slaying rivals long before they could foment any effective rebellion, while strengthening his own power by constantly expanding the strength and reach of his military. Hazergal relied on Azadan as his most trusted ally, and lavished power, prestige, and all manner of valuable gifts upon the Kalvanian mercenary. Together, they ruled an ever-expanding empire for nearly two-centuries, living far beyond their mortal lifespan with the aid of Hazergal's magic.

None truly understand why Azadan turned on Hazergal. Many assume the petty evil that consumed both men simply could not allow any kind of peaceful coexistence between them, and that the paranoia and dire ambition endemic in such wickedness brought about the betrayal. But for whatever reason, Azadan did turn on Hazergal and slew the archmage, ending two centuries of tyranny and evil.

After Hazergal's death, the empire he and Azadan had built slowly crumbled. Azadan seemed to be unable or unwilling to hold the empire together, and it soon fractured into dozen of tiny warring states. The rumors say Azadan himself was slain not long after Hazergal's death by a lowly gnoll soldier, who found the warlord drunk and incoherent atop Hazergal's throne, weeping and whispering the name of his dead ally.

Strategies and Tactics

A mage of unparalleled skill and power, there were few creatures in the multiverse that could hope to best Hazergal in a one-on-one confrontation. The mighty wizard was surrounded at all times by powerful magical wards and curses, and even if an enemy managed to bypass these powerful magics, he would be subject to the full brunt of Hazergal's spell repertoire.

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Hazergal typically began combat with a fusillade of quickened spells, usually *fireball*, *magic missile*, and *lightning bolt*. If his enemy was still standing after this barrage, Hazergal would begin casting more powerful spells, focusing on empowered and maximized versions of *chain lightning*, *cone of cold*, and *meteor swarm*. Against large groups of weaker foes, Hazergal was fond of spells such as *cloudkill*, *black tentacles*, and *mass charm monster*.

A master conjurer, Hazergal was also fond of summoning horrendously powerful creatures to aid him in combat, favoring Gargantuan fiendish monstrous scorpions and powerful demons and other outsiders. Just before his death, Hazergal had bound a bebilith of singular size and ferocity to his will and often summoned this horror to act as a living siege engine in his many military conquests.

Hazergal also researched and developed a number of new spells that far outstripped the power of even the mightiest common enchantments. These spells he rarely used, but on the rare occasions when he wanted to make an example of an enemy, the entire world was witness to an event that approached the power of the gods in proportion. The most famous example of this power came after a small nation on the outskirts of his growing empire refused to bend to his will. In response, Hazergal summoned a rain of fire that lasted for seven days, reducing the capital city of the defiant nation to a smoking ruin of blackened earth and scorched flesh.

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Hedrenatherax the Balor

This mighty fiend is a gargoylesque mountain of living evil and flame. Its massive head features a wide, fanged maw, deep-set reptilian eyes, and two great black horns projecting from either side of its skull. The demon's body is armored with burnished red scales and corded with massive slabs of sinewy muscle. A pair of gargantuan wings, alight with green flame, jut from its broad back, spanning thirty feet from tip to tip. The demon wears only a simply kilt of beaten bronze from which hangs a massive, jagged-edged sword.

Hedrenatherax (CR 28)

Balor Barbarian 10

CE Large Outsider (Chaotic, Evil, Extraplanar)

Init +13; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., *true seeing*; Listen +11, Spot +11

Languages Abyssal, Common, Infernal; telepathy 100 ft.

AC 43, touch 18, flat-footed 43; improved uncanny dodge, uncanny dodge (–1 size, +9 Dex, +19 natural, +6 kilt)

hp 542 (30 HD); **DR** 15/cold iron and good and 2/—

Immune electricity, fire, poison; **SR** 28

Resist acid 10, cold 10

Fort +31, **Ref** +24, **Will** +16

Speed 50 ft. (10 squares), fly 90 ft. (good)

Melee *+2 vorpal flaming falchion* +47/+42/+37/+32 (2d6+24 plus 1d6 fire/15-20) and bite +42 (2d6+7) or

Melee 2 slams +44 melee (1d10+15)

Space 10 ft.; **Reach** 10 ft.

Base Atk +30; **Grapple** +49

Atk Options Cleave, Flyby Attack, Great Cleave, Hover, Improved Sunder, Power Attack

Special Actions rage 3/day, *summon demon*

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 20th)

At will – *blasphemy* (DC 21), *dominate monster* (DC 23), *greater dispel magic*, *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only), *insanity* (DC 21), *power word stun*, *telekinesis* (DC 19), *unholy aura* (DC 22)

1/day – fire storm (DC 22), implosion (DC 23)

Abilities Str 40, Dex 28, Con 34, Int 13, Wis 12, Cha 18

SQ death throes, fast movement, flaming body, trap sense +3

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Feats Cleave, Flyby Attack, Great Cleave, Hover, Improved Critical (falchion), Improved Initiative, Improved Sunder, Multiattack, Power Attack, Quicken Spell-Like Ability (*telekinesis*), Track, Weapon Focus (falchion)

Skills Climb +25, Diplomacy +3, Hide +28, Intimidate +37, Jump +33, Knowledge (the planes) +24, Listen +42, Move Silently +32, Search +24, Sense Motive +24, Spot +32, Survival +34 (+36 following tracks, +36 on other planes)

Possessions *+2 vorpal flaming falchion, +4 bronze kilt*

Death Throes (Ex): If brought below 0 hit points, Hedrenatherax explodes in a blinding flash of light that deals 100 points of damage to anything within 100 feet (Reflex DC 37 half). This explosion automatically destroys any weapons Hedrenatherax is holding.

Flaming Body (Su): Hedrenatherax's body is wreathed in flame. Anyone grappling him takes 6d6 points of fire damage each round. Hedrenatherax can suppress his body flames at will, as a free action.

Rage (Ex): Three times per day, Hedrenatherax can enter a state of fierce rage that lasts for 17 rounds. The following changes are in effect as long as he rages:

AC 41 (touch 16, flat-footed 41)

hp 602

Melee *+2 vorpal flaming falchion* +49/+44/+39/+34 (2d6+27 plus 1d6 fire; 15–20) and bite +44 (2d6+8)

Fort +33, **Will** +18; **Str** 44

Abilities Con 38

Skills Climb +27, Jump +35

At the end of his rage, Hedrenatherax is fatigued for the duration of the encounter.

Summon Demon (Sp): Once per day Hedrenatherax can automatically summon 4d10 dretches, 1d4 hezrous, or one nalfeshnee, glabrezu, marilith, or balor. This ability is the equivalent of a 9th-level spell.

True Seeing (Su): Hedrenatherax has a continuous *true seeing* ability, as the spell (caster level 20th).

Background

Hedrenatherax is a powerful balor in the service of the demon lord Pyrak, acting as an enforcer of his master's will, especially when direct, violent action is necessary. Although powerful, Hedrenatherax is quite dull for a balor, and lacks much of the guile, charisma, and intuition common

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to the most powerful of demons. He makes up for this lack with sheer brutality, and is considered one of the most ruthless, petty, and overtly cruel demons in the Abyss.

Although crude by balor standards, Hedrenatherax is no less ambitious than any other demon. Relentlessly selfish, he sees the eventual rule of his own Abyssal layer as his sovereign right, and his service to Pyrak as simply a means to an end. Pyrak's own considerable power keeps Hedrenatherax from overtly opposing him, but the balor constantly seeks an advantage over his master. Fortunately for Pyrak, Hedrenatherax is both dull and uncreative, and the few schemes he has dreamed up to usurp his master have been either childishly simple or uselessly complex.

Recently, Pyrak has given Hedrenatherax the task of collecting damned petitioners from the gateway layer of Abrigor. These damned petitioners are then sold off to the night hags for useful magical items or information about Pyrak's hated foes, the devils of the Nine Hells.

Strategy & Tactics

An unsubtle combatant, Hedrenatherax prefers to simply rush into melee, rage, and lay about with his massive falchion. He relies on his damage reduction and natural resistances to keep him from harm, although he occasionally casts *unholy aura* before confronting particularly powerful foes, especially those of good alignment.

Hedrenatherax prefers to ambush his targets from the air if possible, and he is an adroit flyer. Upon the Abyssal layer of Vrack, the endless sky is filled with slow-moving clouds, perfect for obfuscating flying creatures, even ones as large as Hedrenatherax. When attacking from the air, Hedrenatherax dives at an opponent, slashing wildly with his sword and allowing his body flames to singe his opponent as he passes. He makes good use of the Flyby Attack and Hover feats against land bound opponents, although he lacks patience for protracted aerial encounters and will eventually land and come to grips with his foes in melee.

Hedrenatherax rarely uses his spell-like abilities, because frankly, he lacks the intellect to use them effectively, and prefers the visceral thrill of melee to spellcasting.

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Hedrenatherax the Demon Lord

This mighty fiend stands nearly twenty feet tall and is covered in shining, black skin, like polished onyx. Its head is a gargoylesque nightmare, with a wide tusked maw, gleaming red eyes, and two massive, gouging horns rising from its wide brow. The fiend is armed with a giant iron spear wielded in its left hand, and a huge bony scythe that has replaced its entire right arm below the elbow. It is naked save for a crude skirt of iron scales.

Hedrenatherax, Demon Lord (CR 33)

CE Huge Outsider (Chaotic, Extraplanar, Evil)

Init +11; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., scent; Listen +46, Spot +46

Languages Abyssal, Celestial, Common, Infernal, telepathy 100 ft.

AC 55, touch 20, flatfooted 55; uncanny dodge
(–2 size, +7 Dex, +35 natural, +5 glove)

hp 736 (40 HD), regeneration 10; **DR** 15/epic, good, and cold iron

Immune acid, fire, electricity, poison

Resist cold 10; **SR** 50

Fort +36, **Ref** +29, **Will** +25

Speed 50 ft. (10 squares)

Melee *Dreadskewer* +58/+53/+48/+43 (3d6+27 plus 4d6 against chaotic creatures plus 4d6 against chaotic outsiders /19-20/×3) and scythe-arm +50/+45/+40 (4d6+10/17-20/×3) and bite +52 (2d8+10 plus wounding) and gore +52 (3d8+10)

Ranged *Dreadskewer* +46 (3d6+27 plus 4d6 against chaotic creatures plus 4d6 against chaotic outsiders /19-20/×3)

Space 15 ft.; **Reach** 15 ft. (20 ft. with Dreadskewer)

Base Atk +34; **Grapple** +62

Atk Options Cleave, Combat Reflexes,Great Cleave, Improved Bull Rush, Improved Sunder, Power Attack, brutal charge 9d8+30, unholy rage, vorpal scythe, wounding bite

Special Actions breath weapon, summon demon

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 40th)

At will – *detect magic*, *greater teleport* (self plus 200 pounds of objects only), *see invisibility*

Abilities Str 50, Dex 24, Con 38, Int 16, Wis 16, Cha 20

SQ demon traits

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Feats Cleave, Combat Reflexes[B], Great Cleave, Greater Two-Weapon Fighting, Improved Bull Rush, Improved Critical (spear), Improved Initiative, Improved Multiattack, Improved Sunder, Improved Two-Weapon Fighting, Multiattack, Power Attack, Track, Two-Weapon Fighting, Weapon Focus (spear)

Skills Climb +63, Diplomacy +7, Hide +42, Intimidate +48, Jump +71, Knowledge (the planes) +46, Listen +46, Move Silently +50, Search +46, Sense Motive +46, Spot +46, Survival +46 (+48 following tracks, +48 on other planes)

Possessions *Dreadskewer* (*+7 huge returning chaotic outsider dread spear of axiomatic power*), *Hedrenatherax's devil skin glove*

Breath Weapon (Su): Once every 1d4 rounds, Hedrenatherax can spew a 60-foot cone of unholy slime and bile. Creatures caught within the cone suffer 20d6 points of initial damage, after that, the caustic slime lingers, inflicting 10d6 points of damage on the second round, and finally 5d6 points of damage on the third and final round. Half of this damage is acid damage, while the other half is pure negative energy and is therefore not subject to resistance to acid-based attacks. A successful DC 44 Reflex save halves the initial damage and prevents any secondary damage. The save DC is Constitution-based.

Brutal Charge (Ex): Hedrenatherax will sometimes begin a battle by charging at an opponent, lowering his head to bring his massive, gouging horns into play. In addition to the normal benefits and hazards of a charge, this allows Hedrenatherax to make a single gore attack with a +54 attack bonus that deals 9d8+30 points of damage. In addition, a creature struck by Hedrenatherax's brutal charge must make a DC 50 Fortitude save or be stunned for 1d10 rounds. The save DC is Strength-based.

Summon Demon (Su): Once per day Hedrenatherax can automatically to summon 1d8 hezrou, 2 nalfeshnee, or 1 marilth. This ability is the equivalent of a 9th-level spell.

Unholy Rage (Ex): At will, Hedrenatherax can fly into a berserk fury that transforms him into a near unstoppable engine of destruction. Activating unholy rage is a free action and confers the following benefits:

- +10 bonus to Strength and Constitution
- Regeneration 20
- Damage reduction 10/-- (in addition to existing damage reduction)
- All weapons and natural attacks gain the *unholy* weapon ability, dealing an extra 2d6 points of damage against good-aligned and neutral opponents
- Speed increases to 70 feet per round
- Immunity to mind-affecting spells and effects

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Hedrenatherax's unholy rage lasts for 15 rounds, after which he is not exhausted and can rage again in 1d4 rounds. In addition, while raging, all chaotic evil creatures within 30 feet of Hedrenatherax must make a DC 45 Will save or fly into a frenzy identical to that of the barbarian's rage ability. Creatures affected by unholy rage remain in their frenzy for as long as Hedrenatherax rages, after which they are exhausted for the remainder of the encounter. The save DC is Charisma-based.

Vorpal Scythe (Su): Hedrenatherax fearsome scythe arm has the *vorpal* weapon property. See the DMG for details.

Wounding Bite (Su): Creatures bitten by Hedrenatherax's huge tusked jaws suffer 2 points of temporary Constitution damage.

Background

Hedrenatherax is a recently promoted demon lord. He is oafish, shortsighted, and has all but dismantled the powerful empire he inherited from his predecessor.

As a balor, Hedrenatherax dreamed of nothing else but ascending to the vaunted status of demon lord, however, his lack of intellect and his inability to play at Abyssal politics, made such an aspiration unlikely in the extreme. He was still a powerful balor, and what he lacked in intelligence, he made up for in brute strength, martial skill, and a murderous efficiency at dispatching demons that angered him.

Hedrenatherax's inability to lead other demons forced him to serve one more powerful than himself, the mighty demon lord Pyrak. For millennia, he served Pyrak as a bodyguard and unsubtle assassin, but day-by-day, his hunger for a throne of his own grew.

When Pyrak was sorely wounded in his battle with Beyemon, Hedrenatherax saw his chance, and challenged the wounded demon lord to a duel. Brash and foolhardy as ever, Hedrenatherax had underestimated his opponent, and although wounded, Pyrak would have slain him if not for an unlikely and fortuitous event. Hedrenatherax's one in a million cast of *Dreadksewer* pierced Pyrak's heart, and the planes of Vrack as well as the title of demon lord fell into his lap.

As a demon lord, Hedrenatherax's body and mind underwent drastic changes. His physical might tripled, and he gained new insight and perception that far surpassed his slow-witted balor form. However, Hedrenatherax was still a barely capable child when compared to the

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awe-inspiring wisdom and intellect of demon lords such as Orcus of Demogorgon.

With Pyrak's death, many of his loyal and powerful servants fled to other Abyssal realms, including the entire host of elite vrocks, known as Dreadwings. This mass exodus left Hedrenatherax with little more than a motley horde of lesser demons, easy to bully, but utterly ineffective in defending his new realm. But still, he set about building his empire the best way he knew how. Hedrenatherax tore down Pyrak's floating citadel and constructed his own palace, a squat tower, ugly and simplistic, which he named Hedrax. Here the new demon lord placed his most valuable possessions, icons of his ascension, the mummified corpse of Pyrak and the former demon lord's awesomely powerful sword, *Fiendbleeder*. Hedrenatherax kept *Dreadskewer* as a mark of his authority, and fashioned a special glove from the skin of a bearded devil to allow him to wield the weapon.

From the moment he took the throne, Hedrenatherax found himself beset by the forces of more powerful demon lords, ever-hungry for new territory and power. Weak as he was, Hedrenatherax could do little to push back an incursion from the likes of Orcus or Lamashtu should they decide he was too weak to resist. Desperate, Hedrenatherax attempted to form alliances with other, lesser demon lords, and in this task he was moderately successful. He approached a number of petty Abyssal rulers with offers of alliance, espousing a doctrine of cooperation to repel the advances of powerful demon lords into their smaller realms. Combining their might, Hedrenatherax and his new allies managed to forestall an impending invasion into Vrack by Orcus. But truly, this only delayed the inevitable. Orcus and other powerful demon lords regard Hedrenatherax as lucky fool, ripe for exploitation or destruction.

Currently Hedrenatherax sits idle in his slowly degrading kingdom, watching demons leave his service in droves. His advisor, the bizarre, rogue devil Gemnez, offers him sage advice, which is one of the few things keeping his tenuous rule intact. However, Gemnez once served Herdrenatherax's former master, and the new demon lord has little reason to trust the renegade infernal.

Strategies and Tactics

Hedrenatherax is not a magically gifted demon lord; in fact, he is rather stunted in the arcane arts. Despite this lack, Hedrenatherax is perhaps the

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most physically impressive demon lords in the Abyss. His enemies, such as the elder demon lords Orcus and Demogorgon, are fully capable of outwitting him or simply crushing him with their massive, abyssal armies, but even potent fiends such as these would falter at facing Hedrenatherax in direct, personal combat.

Hedrenatherax's battle prowess is greatly enhanced by *Dreadskewer*, which grants him a number of potent abilities. Typically, he begins combat with a brutal charge, especially if faced with a single powerful opponent. The shock of Hedrenatherax's great horns and massive body colliding with an enemy is often enough to end the combat outright, and even if his foe survives, he is likely to be knocked senseless by the blow. Against groups of weaker opponents, Hedrenatherax relies on his breath weapon, which is potent enough to reduce enemies to reeking piles of sludge.

In melee, Hedrenatherax wields *Dreadskewer* with his left hand, shielded from the weapon's influence by the devil skin glove he wears. He fights in tandem with spear and the huge, bony scythe of his right arm, gouging and slashing opponents with lighting combinations. In addition, the massive demon lord will bit at foes with his huge, tusked jaws, and gouge them with his massive horns.

Even more devastating than his arsenal of attacks, Hedrenatherax can throw himself into terrible, unholy frenzy, which makes him all but invulnerable. Worse yet, any demons in his presence are likely to succumb to their own rage and join the demon lord's frenzy.

Minions and Allies

Hedrenatherax is woefully deficient in capable minions. Most of the powerful demons in Pyrak's employ left the planes of Vrack after their master's death, correctly gauging Hedrenatherax's weakness. Only Gemnez, the rogue horned devil, stayed to serve the new master of Vrack, and the bloated infernal is perhaps the only thing holding Hedrenatherax's empire together … at least while it serves his purposes.

Although Hedrenatherax does possess an abyssal army, labeling it such is likely a bit of an exaggeration. He commands a motley horde of dretch and babau led by a scant handful of hezrou. Hedrenatherax cannot even claim a single nalfeshnee or glabrezu under his command, and this lack of capable leadership has all but crippled his "army." On the rare occasions Hedrenatherax has led his forces into battle, he has done the bulk of the

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fighting himself, bolstering his ranks with his own superior battle prowess. This tactic has led to a few victories against vastly inferior foes, but a determined horde led by a proper demonic general would very surely tear Hedrenatherax's rag-tag army to pieces.

Hedrenatherax has no following on the Prime Material Plane; he is far too minor a presence in the Abyss to influence events beyond its borders. Should a group of cultists discover and decide to worship him, they would gain access to the following domains: Chaos, Destruction, and Evil. Hedrenatherax's favored weapons are the spear and the scythe.

Dreadskewer

+7 huge chaotic outsider dread spear of axiomatic power; AL LE; Int 20, Wis 20, Cha 15; Speech, Telepathy, 240 ft. vision and hearing, read all languages, read magic; Ego score 73.

Primary Abilities:

- Wielder has free use of the Combat Reflexes feat
- Wielder has free use of uncanny dodge
- Wielder can *detect chaos* at will
- Wielder can *see invisibility* at will

Extraordinary Abilities:

- Wielder can use *true seeing* at will
- Wielder can use *protection from chaos* at will
- Wielder can use *haste* on self (10 round duration)

Awesome Powers:

- 1/day – *bull's strength* (wielder only; intensified; +10 enhancement bonus to Strength)
- 1/day – *stoneskin* (wielder only; extended; 400 minute duration)
- 1/day – *bear's endurance* (wielder only; intensified; +10 enhancement bonus to Constitution)

Special Purpose: Defeat/slay demons

Dedicated Power: Necrotic corruption: a chaotic outsider struck with by dreadskewer must make a DC 70 Fortitude save or taking 1d6 points of Constitution drain. In addition, a second DC 70 Fortitude saving throw must be made, or the victim will take 1d6 points of Constitution drain per day until he dies. If both saving throws are failed, noting short of divine intervention can halt the progress of the necrotic corruption.

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Appearance: *Dreadskewer* is a rather plain iron spear. Its broad head is a dull gray, double-edged, and serrated. *Dreadskewer's* shaft is matte black, nearly 20 feet long, and is inscribed with faint, twisting runes in Elder Infernal.

Personality: Unlike its companion weapon *Fiendbleeder, Dreadskewer* is far less driven to complete the task it was created to do. Although it despises demons, the weapon is rather lazy, and will typically let a wielder do as he pleases, as long as he slays at least one chaotic outsider per month. In addition, *Dreadksewer* rarely speaks with its wielder, preferring to communicate its desires through emotional urges or gentle nudges that seem like the wielder's own inclinations rather than the weapon's influence.

Ultimately, *Dreadskewer* is unconcerned with being anything more than what it is – a weapon. Although it is sentient, the weapon has not gained the kind of independent spirit that possesses *Fiendbleeder*, and is more than happy to serve a master rather than dominate him. This outlook is likely due to the weapon's lawful nature and the millennia it has spent in the rigorously disciplined world of the Nine Hells.

Hedrenatherax's Devil Skin Glove

Hedrenatherax wears an enchanted glove on his left hand constructed from the skin of a bearded devil. It is unknown where the demon lord acquired the glove, but it is likely that the rogue devil Gemnez had a hand in its creation. The glove allows Hedrenatherax to wield *Dreadskewer*, blocking the weapon's mental influence and protecting him from the weapon's searing bite. In addition, the glove grants the following benefits:

- Acts as a *ring of protection +5*
- Grants complete immunity to fire
- Gives any weapon wielded both the throwing and returning weapon special abilities

Strong abjuration and transmutation; CL 20th; Weight 2 lbs.

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Heskera the Marilith General

This mighty demoness is a study in Abyssal contradictions, a living dichotomy of flawless beauty and hideous evil. Her voluptuous torso, amply proportioned, is an icon of human perfection, marred only by six slim, muscular arms, and the massive serpentine body that completes her demonic form. The demoness' face is achingly beautiful, with high cheekbones, full lips, a delicate, almost elfin nose, and eyes like crystal pools of green fire, simultaneously irresistible and horrifyingly alien. A platinum tiara confines the demoness' black tresses, and a subtle hint of rouge darkens the apple of each cheek. The fiend wears nothing but a gauzy mesh of fine, mithral chain about her torso, and a tooled leather harness holding six long curved swords.

Heskera (CR 25)

Marilith Sorcerer 15/Archmage 1
CE Large Outsider (Chaotic, Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +6; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., true seeing; Listen +30, Spot +30
Languages Abyssal, Auran, Celestial, Common, Ignan, Infernal; telepathy 100 ft.

AC 39, touch 15, flat-footed 33 (-1 size, +6 Dex, +16 natural, +8 armor)
hp 479 (32 HD); **DR** 10/cold iron and good
Immune electricity, poison; SR 25
Resist acid 10, fire 10, cold 10
Fort +26, **Ref** +21, **Will** +24

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares)
Melee +2 spellstoring longsword +34/+29/+24/+19 (2d6+11/19-20) and 5 +2 spellstoring longswords +34 (2d6+6/19-20) and tail slap +26 (4d6+4) or
Melee 6 slams +31 (1d8+9) and tail slap +26 (4d6+4)
Space 10 ft.; Reach 10 ft.
Base Atk +23; **Grapple** +36
Atk Options Cleave, Power Attack, improved grab, constrict 4d6+13
Special Actions summon demon
Sorcerer Spells Known (CL 16th, 10% chance of spell failure)
8th (4/day) – *horrid wilting* (DC 32)
7th (7/day) – *plane shift*, *prismatic spray* (DC 31)
6th (8/day) – *disintegrate* (DC 29), *eyebite* (DC 30), *greater dispel magic*
5th (9/day) – *cone of cold* (DC 29), *dismissal* (DC 28), *hold monster* (DC 28), *wall of force*
4th (9/day) – *black tentacles*, *greater invisibility*, *shout* (DC 28), *stoneskin*

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3rd (9/day) – *displacement*, *fireball* (DC 27), *protection from energy*, *vampiric touch*

2nd (9/day) – *eagle's splendor*, *hideous laughter* (DC 25), *mirror image*, *scorching ray*, *web* (DC 25)

1st (15/day) – *mage armor*, *magic missile*, *ray of enfeeblement*, *shield*, *true strike*

0 (6/day) – *daze* (DC 23), *detect magic*, *light*, *mage hand*, *mending*, *message*, *read magic*, *resistance*, *touch of fatigue* (DC 24)

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 16th)

At will – *align weapon*, *blade barrier* (DC 29), *magic weapon*, *project image* (DC 29), *see invisibility*, *telekinesis* (DC 28), *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only), *unholy aura* (DC 31).

Abilities Str 28, Dex 22, Con 32, Int 22, Wis 16, Cha 36

SQ high arcana (mastery of elements)

Feats Empower Spell, Greater Spell Penetration, Maximize Spell, Multiattack, Multiweapon Fighting, Power Attack, Skill Focus (spellcraft), Spell Focus (evocation), Spell Focus (necromancy), Spell Penetration, Weapon Focus (longsword)

Skills Bluff +48, Concentration +46, Diplomacy +44, Disguise +32 (+34 acting), Hide +21, Intimidate +42, Knowledge (arcana) +22, Listen +30, Move Silently +25, Search +33, Sense Motive +30, Spellcraft +46 (+48 scrolls), Spot +30, Survival +22 (+23 following tracks), Use Magic Device +32 (+34 scrolls)

Possessions Six *+2 spellstoring longswords*, *tiara of sorcerous might*, *+4 mithral shirt*

Constrict (Ex): Heskera deals 4d6+13 points of damage with a successful grapple check. The constricted creature must succeed on a DC 35 Fortitude save or lose consciousness for as long as it remains in Heskera's coils and for 2d4 rounds thereafter.

Mastery of Elements (Su): Heskera can alter any arcane spell to utilize a different element than the one it normally uses. This ability does not affect the casting time of the spell.

Improved Grab (Ex): To use this ability, Heskera must hit with her tail slap attack. She can then attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity. If she succeeds on the grapple check, she can constrict.

Summon Demon (Sp): Once per day Heskera can attempt to summon 4d10 dretches, 1d4 hezrou, or one nalfeshnee with a 50% chance of success, or one glabrezu or another marilith with a 20% chance of success. This ability is the equivalent of a 5th-level spell.

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True Seeing (Su): Heskera continuously uses this ability, as the spell (caster level 16th).

Tiara of Sorcerous Might

This platinum tiara grants a +6 enhancement bonus to the wearer's Charisma score. In addition, the tiara doubles the number of 1st level spells a sorcerer can use per day.

Strong transmutation; CL 13th; Craft Wondrous Item, *eagle's splendor*, *limited wish*; Price 56,000 gp.

A powerful marilith in the service of the demon lord Pyrak, Heskera has proven herself a formidable commander of Abyssal armies in the eternal war against the Nine Hells.

Background

Heskera's military successes have come not from her skill at motivating her troops - abyssal armies are notoriously fractious and disorganized - but from her own considerable personal power. A mighty sorcerer, Heskera has personally decimated legions of devils with her magic, due in large part to her mastery of destructive sonic energy, an element that neither devils nor demons can resist naturally.

Although she is still highly chaotic, Heskera tempers her tempestuous inclinations with a healthy dose of practicality, and can usually avoid making rash decisions. This behavior is directly attributable to her relationship with her master, Pyrak, and the two share a relatively unique trust, a priceless commodity in the treacherous world of demonic politics. This bizarre relationship has much to do with Pyrak himself, as the anomalous demon lord and his skewed view of Abyssal politics has an influencing effect on the demons around him.

Lately Heskera has spent the majority of her time pursuing personal power, and her performance as a battlefield commander has faltered. The marilith entertains grandiose designs of becoming a demon lord herself, and has been slowly accumulating magical items and unique spells to affect this transformation. A number of disastrous defeats against the forces of the Nine Hells have frayed her relationship with Pyrak. The recent death of another powerful demon servant—by the demon lord's own hand—has caused her to refocus her efforts on pleasing her master.

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Strategy & Tactics

Heskera combines the natural might of her demonic form with the skills of a powerful sorcerer. This combination makes her a match for a diverse array of opponents, and she has even humbled a few demon lords and archdevils with her formidable talents at spellcraft and swordplay.

If given time, Heskera begins combat by casting *unholy aura* and *improved invisibility*. She then unleashes a barrage of offensive spells upon her opponents, using her mastery of elements ability to exploit energy weaknesses or pierce energy resistances. Against other demons and, of course, devils, Heskera makes heavy use of sonic energy, altering spells such as *cone of cold*, *fireball*, and *scorching ray* to inflict sonic damage. She also frequently employs Empower Spell and Maximize Spell when casting offensive magic, often destroying lesser foes by the droves with a single spell.

Although she prefers to tackle her foes with magic, Heskera will readily enter melee if the opportunity presents itself. She commonly stores an empowered *magic missile* in each of her six *spellstoring longswords*, unleashing a fusillade of magical darts upon a foe before closing for melee.

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Igyx, once Azadan

This horrific fiend stands twelve feet tall and is covered in black, gleaming skin stretched taut over a gaunt, skeletal frame. Its head is a fanged skull crowned with a single spiraling horn. Two small, vicious eyes stare out from deep sockets, and thin lips pull back to reveal a mouthful of broken, yellow fangs. A viscous red slime coats the fiend from head to toe, occasionally dripping from its body to leave a scorched hole in the ground. The fiend grips a long, jagged sword in its right hand and bears a large, round shield in its left.

Igyx/Azadan (CR 35)

Advanced Unique Babau Fighter 25
CE Large Outsider (Chaotic Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +2; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft; Listen +30, Spot +4
Language Abyssal, Common, Infernal, telepathy 100 ft.

AC 30, touch 13, flat-footed 26; Dodge, Mobility
(–1 size, +4 Dex, +10 natural, +7 shield)
hp 451 (40 HD); **DR** 10/cold iron or good
Immune electricity, poison
Resist acid 10, cold 10, fire 10; SR 21
Fort +30, Ref +21, Will +20

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares)
Melee +4 cold iron sonic detonation longsword +57/+52/+47/+42 (2d6+22 plus 1d6 sonic/17-20) or
Melee +4 cold iron sonic detonation longsword +55/+50/+45/+40 (2d6+22 plus 1d6 sonic/17-20) and +5 bashing heavy steel shield +47 (2d6+6)
Space 10 ft.; **Reach** 10 ft.
Base Atk +40; **Grp** +54
Atk Options Cleave, Combat Expertise, Devastating Critical (longsword), Dire Charge, Epic Weapon Focus (longsword), Epic Weapon Specialization (longsword), Great Cleave, Improved Bull Rush, Improved Disarm, Improved Sunder, Improved Trip, Multiattack, Overwhelming Critical, Power Attack, Spring Attack, Whirlwind Attack, sneak attack +4d6
Special Actions abyssal inspiration, command lesser fiends (+5, 2d6+25), summon demon
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 12th)
At will – *darkness*, *dispel magic*, *see invisibility*, *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only)

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Abilities Str 30, Dex 19, Con 24, Int 15, Wis 17, Cha 20

SQ abyssal empathy, protective slime

Feats Alertness, Cleave, Combat Expertise, Dodge, Great Cleave, Greater Weapon Focus (longsword), Greater Weapon Specialization (longsword), Improved Bull Rush, Improved Critical (longsword), Improved Disarm, Improved Sunder, Improved Trip, Improved Shield Bash, Leadership, Mobility, Multiattack, Power Attack, Spring Attack, Two-Weapon Fighting, Weapon Focus (longsword), Weapon Specialization (longsword), Whirlwind Attack

Epic Feats Devastating Critical (longsword), Dire Charge, Epic Weapon Focus (longsword), Epic Weapon Specialization (longsword), Overwhelming Critical (longsword)

Skills Climb +52, Disable Device +20, Disguise +21, Escape Artist +19, Handle Animal +17, Hide +23, Intimidate +28, Jump +38, Listen +30, Move Silently +27, Open Lock +20, Ride +14, Search +28, Slight of Hand +19, Spot +4, Survival +2 (+4 following tracks), Use Rope +2 (+4 with bindings)

Possessions *+4 cold iron sonic detonation longsword, +5 bashing heavy steel shield*

Abyssal Empathy (Su): Chaotic evil outsiders with less than 10 Hit Dice will always view Igyx as an ally, and will not attack him unless compelled to do so. Even if compelled, a chaotic evil outsider with less than 10 Hit Dice must succeed on a DC 35 Will save or refuse to attack Igyx. The high DC of this saving throw all but ensures that minor demons will be unable to attack him.

Abyssal Inspiration (Su): Once per day, as a free action, Igyx can bolster the morale of all chaotic evil outsiders with less than 10 Hit Dice within 60 feet of himself. This effect is identical to the bard's inspire greatness ability, save that it lasts for 10 rounds. Affected creatures must be able to see and hear Igyx to gain the benefits of abyssal inspiration. This is a mind-affecting ability.

Command Lesser Fiends (Su): Igyx can command evil outsiders with less than 10 Hit Dice in the same way an evil cleric commands undead. Igyx is considered an evil cleric of 20th level for this purpose, and may command lesser fiends up to 7 times per day.

Protective Slime (Su): A slimy red jelly coats Igyx's skin. Any weapon that touches it takes 2d6 points of acid damage from the corrosive goo, and the weapon's hardness does not reduce this damage. A magic weapon may attempt a DC 37 Reflex save to avoid taking this damage. A creature who strikes Igyx with an unarmed attack, unarmed strike, touch spell, or natural weapon takes this damage as well but can negate the damage with a DC 37 Reflex save.

Sneak Attack (Ex): Igyx can make a sneak attack like a rogue, dealing an extra

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4d6 points of damage whenever a foe is denied his or her Dexterity bonus, or when the Igyx is flanking.

Summon Demon (Sp): Once per day, Igyx can attempt to summon 1 babau or 2d6 dretches with a 40% chance of success. This ability is the equivalent of a 3rd-level spell.

Background

Igyx is a strange babau warrior that has the ability to command lesser fiends. Like his master Hazergal, he was once a powerful mortal, and his transformation into a demon has created a unique, hybrid creature, whose powers are not fully understood.

The babau Igyx was once Azadan, the powerful mortal general of the archmage Hazergal. Azadan was instrumental in Hazergal's conquest of the kingdom of Othregard, and his tactical genius, along with his own peerless skill at arms, allowed the wicked archmage to completely decimate his enemies.

Azadan's eventual betrayal of Hazergal and his usurpation of the empire they had built together proved to be his downfall. A great general, Azadan found that leading an army was far different than ruling an empire, especially the dark, chaotic kingdom Hazergal had built. Hazergal's enemies, once kept in check by the powerful mage's personal power, were now free to move on Azadan. Unable to defend himself from both political and physical threats from all directions, he was cornered and slain on Hazergal's throne by a determined band of assassins.

Azadan's death, however, like his master's, was only the beginning of his bizarre destiny. Like other damned souls, Azadan found himself alone and bereft of memory on the horrid, gateway plane of Abrigor. There he was collected by an agent of Gemnez, the rogue devil in service to the demon lord Pyrak, and carried off to the spawning pits of Gemnez Drak.

As a near mindless petitioner, Azadan was cast into the boiling mire of the spawning pit, there to undergo the horrid transformation into a lesser demon. His body was remade by the powerful magic of the pit, and, oddly enough, his mortal memory was partially restored to him, although buried deep in his subconscious. The demon that was pulled from the spawning pit was an oversized babau that called itself Igyx, but its gleaming, black flesh housed the heart and mind of the powerful mortal warrior.

Despite the fact the Igyx did not remember his life as Azadan, he

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retained much of the mortal warrior's personality. This manifested in an ability to bolster and command lesser fiends, mush as he did with mortal soldiers when leading armies for Hazergal. Uncontested, Igyx simply wandered away from the pit of Gemnez Drak and began to wander across the abyssal plains of Vrack. As he wandered, the half-mortal babau gathered a small group of dretches, which he regarded as beloved pets, doting on the small demons like a protective parent.

Igyx and his small host of dretches eventually happened upon the ruins of Pyrak's floating citadel, and took refuge there. It was in these ruins that Igyx encountered Hazergal, as the former archmage searched for the sword *Fiendbleeder*. Reunited with his former master, Igyx's memory of his mortal life returned, and he was Azadan once more. Reconciled with his former master, Azadan now endeavors to serve Hazergal more fervently and faithfully than he ever did in life.

Strategies and Tactics

Igyx/Azadan has retained the fearsome skill at arms he possessed as a mortal. This, coupled with his demonic body, makes him a truly terrifying adversary. Like any powerful fighter, Azadan makes excellent use of his wide variety of feats. His typical attack routine opens with the use of Dire Charge, allowing him to make a full attack even after a charge. After the opening round, Azadan assesses his enemy's strengths and weaknesses, modifying his tactic accordingly.

Against powerful single opponents, Azadan makes good use of a combination of Spring Attack and Power Attack, dodging in and out of his opponent's reach, while landing savagely powerful blows. In addition, he uses other feats such as Improved Bull Rush, Improved Trip, Improved Disarm, and Improved Sunder, to control the battlefield and keep his opponent guessing.

Groups of weaker opponents are targeted with a fusillade of sword strokes and shield bashing empowered with Power Attack, as Azadan cleaves his way through the enemy ranks. Whirlwind Attack is also a favorite tactic of the powerful babau fighter.

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New Weapon Quality

Sonic Detonation: Upon command, a sonic detonation weapon is sheathed in a buzzing envelope of disruptive sound. A sonic detonation weapon deals an additional 1d6 point of sonic damage on a successful hit. In addition to the extra sonic damage, a sonic detonation weapon deals an extra 1d10 points of sonic damage on a successful critical hit. If the weapon's critical multiplier is x3, add an extra 2d10 points of sonic damage instead, and if the multiplier is x4, add an extra 3d10 points of sonic damage. Finally, any creature suffering a critical hit with a sonic detonation weapon must make a DC 20 Fortitude save or be stunned for 1d4 rounds. Bows, crossbows, and slings so crafted bestow the sonic energy upon their ammunition.

Even if the sonic ability is not active, the weapon still deals its extra sonic damage on a successful critical hit.

Strong evocation; CL 12th; Craft Magic Arms and Armor, *sound burst*, or *shout*; Price +3 bonus.

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Ikonia the Succubus Glutton

This demoness is a mountain of jiggling, pale flesh, yet despite her staggering obesity, she is still a sensuous and darkly attractive creature. Clad in little more than a loin clout, the fiend's enormous female charms are displayed for all to see. Her face, although swollen and massive, is oddly beautiful, and her beady, piggish eyes pulse with a feral, gluttonous vitality. The demoness is armed with long, sharp claws at the end of each pudgy finger, and grips a massive cleaver, stained with blood and other, less-identifiable substances.

Ikonia (CR 18)

Advanced Unique Succubus Fighter 10
CE Medium Outsider (Chaotic, Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +7; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft. scent; Listen +24, Spot +24
Language Abyssal, Common; telepathy 100 ft., tongues

AC 28, touch 13, flat-footed 28; Dodge, Mobility (+3 Dex, +15 natural)
hp 215 (22 HD); **DR** 10/cold iron or good
Immune bludgeoning damage, electricity, poison
Resist acid 10, cold 10, fire 10, sneak attacks and critical hits; **SR** 24
Fort +19, **Ref** +14, **Will** +12

Speed 20 ft. (6 squares), fly 40 ft. (poor)
Melee *+2 greataxe** +30/+25/+20/+15 (1d12+22/19-20/×3)
* Includes 3-point Power Attack
Space 5 ft.; **Reach** 5 ft.
Base Atk +22; **Grp** +33
Atk Options Cleave, Dodge, Great Cleave, Improved Bull Rush, Improved Sunder, Power Attack, energy drain
Special Actions summon demon
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 12th)
At will – *charm monster* (DC 20), *detect good*, *detect thoughts* (DC 18), *ethereal jaunt* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only), *suggestion* (DC 19), *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only)

Abilities Str 24, Dex 16, Con 18, Int 16, Wis 12, Cha 22
SQ protective fat
Feats Cleave, Dodge, Great Cleave, Greater Weapon Focus (greataxe), Improved Critical (greataxe), Improved Grapple, Improved Initiative, Improved Sunder, Mobility, Persuasive, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (greataxe), Weapon Specialization (greataxe)

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Skills Bluff +21, Climb +32, Concentration +19, Craft (leatherworking) +13, Diplomacy +23, Disguise +21 (+23 acting), Intimidate +33, Jump +11, Knowledge (the planes) +18, Profession (cook) +26, Listen +24, Search +18, Spot +24, Survival +3 (+5 following tracks, +5 on other planes)

Possessions *+2 greataxe*

Energy Drain (Su): Ikonia can drain energy from a mortal she lures into some act of passion, or by simply planting a kiss on the victim. If the target is not willing to be kissed, Ikonia must start a grapple, which provokes an attack of opportunity. Her kiss or embrace bestows one negative level. The kiss also has the effect of a suggestion spell, asking the victim to accept another kiss from Ikonia. The victim must succeed on a DC 27 Will save to negate the effect of the suggestion. The DC is 27 for the Fortitude save to remove a negative level.

Protective Fat (Ex): The layers of dropping fat that cover Ikonia affords her some protection against physical attacks. She has a flat 50% chance of ignoring sneak attacks or critical hits, as her vitals are simply harder to reach. In addition, Ikonia is immune to bludgeoning weapons and attack that do crushing damage.

Summon Demon (Sp): Once per day Ikonia can attempt to summon 1 vrock with a 30% chance of success. This ability is the equivalent of a 3rd-level spell.

Tongues (Su): Ikonia has a permanent tongues ability (as the spell, caster level 12th).

Background

Most succubi spend their time seducing mortals into acts of passion, corrupting minds and harvesting mortal souls for their Abyssal masters. Like most demons, succubi do what they are made to do, and despite their chaotic nature, rarely deviate from the hard-wired evil of their fiendish race. However, anomalies do occur, and occasionally a succubus will abandon her duties as a seducer of mortals, and pursue other, less wholesome sins.

Ikonia is one such succubus that has forsaken the subtle seductions of lust and dark passion for the ungainly appetites of a cannibalistic glutton. This odd desire first manifested not long after Ikonia was promoted from babau to succubus, and while all succubi hunger for flesh, Ikonia took this appetite to a far more literal extreme. Instead of simply seducing mortals into carnal pursuits, Ikonia began to eat them, devouring her victims while they still reeled in amorous stupor.

Of course, Ikonia's cannibalism did little to further her career as a successful succubus. The act of devouring her victims prevented her from

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harvesting their souls, and to make matters worse, she began to grow fat, making her less appealing to mortals. Ikonia's master, a minor demon lord named Ogrukk, was infuriated by her growing inability to bring him fresh souls, and she was forced to flee his domain or be destroyed.

After leaving Ogrukk's service, Ikonia wandered across a number of Abyssal planes, devouring lesser demons when she could catch them, and growing truly elephantine in size. As she wandered, Ikonia began to rely less and less on her natural succubus abilities, and more on her increasing size and strength. She became quite skilled with an axe, and soon her body had become so massive that it actually offered her a modicum of protection from the claws and teeth of her enemies.

Ikonia met her current master, the glabrezu sorcerer Kynkaros, on the Abyssal layer of Shorguth Mar, where he too was fleeing an angry master. The two demons, sharing a common plight, pooled their resources and began to travel together. Soon Kynkaros, the more powerful of the two, asserted his dominance, and Ikonia became both lover and servant to the powerful nalfeshnee.

Recently, Ikonia and Kynkaros have been dwelling in the ruins of Pyrak's floating citadel, and have been indulging their gross appetites on the minor demons that live there.

Strategies and Tactics

Unlike most succubi, Ikonia lacks subtlety, and prefers straight-ahead melee combat. However, she is not above attempting to charm a powerful foe, following up with a *suggestion* to accept her embrace. Against weaker opponents, Ikonia opens with *ethereal jaunt,* attempting to appear behind her foe and strike with her axe or initiate a grapple.

In melee, Ikonia uses a massive two-handed axe, shaped like a cleaver. She is quite skilled and makes good use of Cleave, Improved Sunder, and Power Attack to decimate her foes. Ikonia's flabby body offers her some protection against critical hits and sneak attacks, as well as rendering her immune to bludgeoning damage. Because of this she fights aggressively, and rarely flees a battle, even if things appear to be going against her.

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Kynkaros, the Glabrezu Outcast

The mammoth fiend stands twenty feet tall and possesses two sets of powerful limbs. The first set of limbs jut from the creature's shoulders and end in massive, barbed pincers, while the second set, much smaller and human-like, extend directly from the demon's broad chest. A snarling, canine head sits atop the fiend's brawny neck, and stares down at you with unrestrained malevolence. Softening the giant demon's horrific appearance is a small, jeweled tiara resting between its dog-like ears.

Kynkaros (CR 21)

Elite Glabrezu Sorcerer 14
CE Huge Outsider (Chaotic Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +0; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft, *true seeing*; Listen +33, Spot +33
Language Abyssal, Aquan, Celestial, Common, Ignan, Infernal, Terran, telepathy 100 ft.

AC 27, touch 8, flat-footed 27 (–2 size, +19 natural)
hp 349 (26 HD); **DR** 10/good
Immune electricity, poison
Resist acid 10, cold 10, fire 10; SR 35
Fort +22, **Ref** +12, **Will** +20

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares)
Melee 2 pincers +29 (2d8+11) and 2 claws +26 (1d6+5) and bite +26 (1d8+5)
Space 15 ft.; **Reach** 15 ft.
Base Atk +19; **Grp** +38
Atk Options Cleave, Improved Bull Rush, Power Attack, improved grab
Special Actions summon demon
Sorcerer Spells Known (CL 14th)
7th (4/day) – *prismatic spray* (DC 26)
6th (6/day) – *disintegrate* (DC 25), *greater dispel magic*
5th (8/day) – *cone of cold* (DC 24), *feeblemind* (DC 24), *hold monster* (DC 24)
4th (8/day) – *bestow curse* (DC 23), *crushing despair* (DC 23), *dimensional anchor* (DC 23), *stoneskin*
3rd (8/day) – *displacement*, *fireball* (DC 22), *protection from energy*, *suggestion* (DC 22)
2nd (8/day) – *acid arrow*, *darkness*, *levitate*, *scorching ray*, *web* (DC 21)
1st (18/day) – *grease* (DC 20), *mage armor*, *magic missile*, *shield*, *true strike*
0 (6/day) – *acid splash*, *arcane mark*, *daze* (DC 19), *detect magic*, *light*, *message*,

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open/close, *ray of frost*, *read magic*

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 14th)

At will - *chaos hammer* (DC 23), *confusion* (DC 23), *dispel magic*, *mirror image*, *reverse gravity* (DC 26), *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only), *unholy blight* (DC 23)

1/day – *power word stun*

Abilities Str 33, Dex 10, Con 30, Int 20, Wis 16, Cha 28

SQ demon traits

Feats Cleave, Empower Spell, Greater Spell Penetration, Improved Bull Rush, Maximize Spell, Muliattack, Power Attack, Spell Penetration, Weapon Focus (pincer)

Skills Bluff +36, Concentration +39, Diplomacy +28, Disguise +9 (+11 acting), Intimidate +26, Knowledge (arcana) +34, Knowledge (the planes) +20, Listen +33, Move Silently +15, Search +27, Sense Motive +18, Spellcraft +36, Spot +33, Survival +18 (+20 following tracks, +20 on other planes)

Possessions *tiara of sorcerous might*

Improved Grab (Ex): To use this ability, Kynkaros must hit a Medium or smaller opponent with a pincer attack. It can then attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity.

Summon Demon (Sp): Twice per day Kynkaros can attempt to summon 4d10 dretches or 1d2 vrocks with a 50% chance of success, or another glabrezu with a 20% chance of success. This ability is the equivalent of a 4th-level spell.

True Seeing (Su): Kynkaros continuously uses *true seeing*, as the spell (caster level 14th).

Tiara of Sorcerous Might

This platinum tiara grants a +6 enhancement bonus to the wearer's Charisma score. In addition, the tiara doubles the number of 1st-level spells a sorcerer can use per day.

Strong transmutation; CL 13th; Craft Wondrous Item, *eagle's splendor*, *limited wish*; Price 56,000 gp.

Background

It is a rare demon that decides to increase his power by pursuing the development of the arcane arts, an endeavor far more common among mortals. This might seem surprising, since demons possess a large amount of innate magical ability. However, the chaotic evil nature of demon-kind

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makes it very difficult for an individual fiend to put forth the kind of effort, focus, and discipline required to become a powerful spellcaster. The few demons that do pursue the arcane arts do so a sorcerers rather than wizards, and simply encourage the growth of their existing innate abilities.

There are, however, other difficulties confronting a demon that forsakes the regular advancement of its kind to focus on building arcane power. Such demons are regarded as strange by their fellows, and a demon that manages to gather any significant power in this area, will likely be seen as a threat by the local demon lord or prince – always a lethal state of affairs. Therefore, a demon that wishes to add the powers of a wizard or sorcerer to his repertoire must often do so in secret, and if discovered, often time he must flee or face destruction.

Such is the plight of the glabrezu Kynkaros, a potent sorcerer and the one time advisor to the minor demon lord Lyshgaar. Kynkaros, with eyes upon his master's throne, began to train in the sorcerous arts, and had become quite skilled by the time Lyshgaar discovered his minion's illicit abilities. A battle ensued, and although Kynkaros could not destroy his master, his magic allowed him to escape destruction.

After his ill-fated battle with Lyshgaar, Kynkaros was an outcast demon, fleeing his master's wrath. He fled to the abyssal plane of Vrack, which had recently lost its powerful ruler, Pyrak, to an upstart usurper. In the ensuing chaos of Pyrak's demise and Hedrenatherax's rise to power, Kynkaros was able to enter Vrack undetected. There he wandered for a bit, until he encountered the rotund succubus warrior Ikonia. Both demons found that they shared a similar plight, and Kynkaros allowed the succubus to travel with him, treating her as a capable and favored minion. Ikonia, relieved to have an able master to protect and provide for her, readily accepted the situation.

Kynkaros and Ikonia settled in the ruins of Pyrak's floating citadel, and there the sorcerous glabrezu began to build a small following of minor demons. A chance discovery of a powerful magical item on the corpse of a marilith strengthened Kynkaros' arcane abilities, and has helped fuel a number of delusions regarding ruling his own plane and becoming a demon lord. Kynkaros has even taken to calling himself "Duke Kynkaros" in expectation of the power and prestige he is certain will one day be his.

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Strategies and Tactics

Kynkaros is a powerful sorcerer and an intelligent, unpredictable foe. His arsenal of spells, combined with his innate magical ability, makes him a truly daunting enemy. Add to this the juggernaut resistance of his demonic body, and there are few creatures in the Abyss, save for the abyssal rulers themselves, that can challenge the mighty glabrezu.

Kynkaros enjoys casting spells, and although he is fully capable of tearing a giant to pieces with his mighty claws, he avoids melee combat whenever possible. Kynkaros always prepares well ahead of time if he is expecting combat, armoring his body in layers of protective spells, such as *mage armor, protection from energy, shield,* and *stoneskin.*

When combat begins, Kynkaros likes to open with a powerful area effect spell. He favors *prismatic spray* and *cone of cold* (empowered) for his opening salvo, hoping to slay as many opponents as possible, or substantially weaken them. After his initial barrage, Kynkaros picks off weakened opponents with target spells, using a combination of *magic missile, acid arrow,* and *scorching ray* for weaker targets, and *disintegrate* for more potent adversaries. Against other demons, Kynkaros makes liberal use of *dimensional anchor* to keep his wounded enemies from fleeing.

Kynkaros always has a number of escape plans handy, although his arrogance and over confidence in his own abilities sometimes cause him to stay in a fight that isn't going his way.

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Lobgog, Dretch Commander

This pathetic, fleshy demon wields a greataxe, wears a chain shirt and headband, and has a surprising gleam of intelligence in its eye.

Lobgog (CR 8)

Advanced Dretch Warrior 6
CE Medium Outsider (Chaotic, Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +0; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft; Listen +12, Spot +12
Language Abyssal, telepathy 100 ft.

AC 20, touch 10, flat-footed 20 (+5 natural, +5 armor)
hp 119 (14 HD); **DR** 5/cold iron or good
Immune electricity, poison
Resist acid 10, cold 10, fire 10
Fort +17, **Ref** +10, **Will** +11

Speed 30 ft. (6 squares)
Melee +2 greataxe +21/+16/+11 (1d12+8/×3) and bite +16 (1d6+2)
Melee 2 claws +18 (1d8+4) and bite +16 (1d6+2)
Space 5 ft.; **Reach** 5 ft.
Base Atk +14; **Grp** +18
Atk Options Cleave, Great Cleave, Power Attack
Special Actions summon demon
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 8th)
1/day – *scare* (DC 13), *stinking cloud* (DC 14)

Abilities Str 19, Dex 10, Con 18, Int 11, Wis 13, Cha 12
SQ demon traits
Feats Cleave, Great Cleave, Multiattack, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (greataxe)
Skills Hide +11, Intimidate +7, Listen +12, Move Silently +11, Spot +12, Search +10, Survival +12 (+14 following tracks)
Possessions *+2 greataxe, +1 chain shirt, cloak of resistance +2, headband of intellect +4*

Summon Demon (Sp): Once per day Lobgog can attempt to summon 1d3 dretches with a 50% chance of success. This is the equivalent of a 2nd-level spell.
Telepathy (Su): Dretches can communicate telepathically with creatures within 100 feet that speak Abyssal.

Lobgog is an exceptionally large and intelligent dretch whose abilities are further enhanced by a number of potent magical items. He more or less

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leads the dretch horde in service to his beloved master Azadan.

Background

Dretches rarely survive long enough to grow in power, and those that do are typically chosen to become a more powerful type of demon, usually a babau. Only in rare instances will a dretch actually progress as a dretch, achieving a modest level of power, enough to bully and influence other dretches anyway. Lobgog is one such dretch, and he has grown to epic proportions by dretch standards, standing nearly six feet tall and weighing in excess of two hundred pounds.

Like many of his fellow dretches, Lobgog felt the irresistible pull of Azadan's influence and followed it to the gates of Hedrax, where the former human general was amassing his army. As the strongest of his kind, Lobgog found immediate favor with his new master, and found that he actually wanted to please Azadan, an anomalous trait common to all the dretches that served the powerful babau commander.

Lobgog proved his value quickly, leading his dretches ably in a number of skirmishes with Yaghur Hod's scouting sorties. His task was to lead his dretches into the daemonic line and disrupt their cohesion with chaotic, mob tactics. This he did well, as it played to natural strengths of his race. In addition, Lobgog showcased his skill as a n individual combatant, and destroyed a number of powerful daemons in one on one combat.

For his successes, Azadan rewarded Lobgog with a number of fairly potent magical items. This included an enchanted greataxe, a shirt of enchanted steel links, a crimson cloak, and lastly, a circlet that vastly increased the dretch's cognitive ability.

Strategies & Tactics

With his circlet, Lobgog is equal to a fairly bright human in terms of intellect and cognitive ability. This allows him to utilize a fair number of complex tactics that would normally be far beyond a dretch's ability. Lobgog begins combat by attempting to summon more of his brethren, thereby allowing him to flank or overwhelm individual foes. After that, he typically moves into melee with his axe, making good use of his Power Attack and Cleave feats to quickly decimate weaker foes. He rarely uses his spell-like abilities, save for the occasional *stinking cloud* to cover his advance or escape.

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Lobgog's primary tactical weakness, however, is his overconfidence in his new abilities. His increased intellect, coupled with his chaotic alignment, has made him rash, and he often engages foes that are simply too powerful for him to handle. Luckily the vast numbers of dretches that fight alongside him have evened the odds, but eventually he may run afoul of an enemy that will not be intimidate by dretches, no matter how many, or how big they are.

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Nyxus, Terradaemon Commander

This massive fiend stands nearly twenty feet tall and is roughly humanoid in shape. Its body is crudely formed, with thick limbs and a squat torso, and its head is a round lump, from which stares a single glaring red eye. It is armored in a breastplate of dull black metal and clenches a gargantuan steel hammer in both thick-fingered hands.

Nyxus (CR 25)

Advanced Terradaemon Fighter 10
NE Huge Outsider (Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +1; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft, true seeing; Listen +30, Spot +30
Language Abyssal, Infernal, telepathy 100 ft.

AC 34, touch 9, flat-footed 33 (-2 size, +1 Dex, +18 natural, +7 armor)
hp 499 (32 HD); **DR** 10/good
Immune poison, sonic
Resist cold 10, fire 10; **SR** 29
Fort +30, **Ref** +17, **Will** +21

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares), burrow 20 ft.
Melee +3 thundering maul +48/+43/+38/+33 (3d8+27/19-20/×3)
Melee 2 slams +43 melee (2d6+15)
Ranged rock +29 (3d8+15)
Space 15 ft.; Reach 15 ft.
Base Atk +30; **Grp** +53
Atk Options Awesome Blow, Cleave, Great Cleave, Improved Bull Rush, Improved Overrun, Improved Sunder, Power Attack, earth mastery, obliterating resonance, rock throwing
Special Actions weakening gaze
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 20th)
At will – *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only), *magic stone*, *soften earth and stone*
1/day – *stoneskin*

Abilities Str 40, Dex 12, Con 30, Int 12, Wis 16, Cha 16
SQ daemon traits
Feats Ability Focus (weakening gaze), Alertness, Awesome Blow, Cleave, Great Cleave, Greater Weapon Focus (maul), Improved Bull Rush, Improved Critical (maul), Improved Overrun, Improved Sunder, Iron Will, Power Attack, Toughness (2), Weapon Focus (maul), Weapon Specialization (maul)

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Skills Climb +49, Diplomacy +5, Intimidate +38, Jump +49, Knowledge (architecture and engineering) +26, Knowledge (the planes) +26, Listen +30, Search +1 (+3 with secret doors), Sense Motive +28, Spot +30, Survival +28 (+30 on other planes)

Possessions *Earthshaker* (*+3 thundering maul*), *+3 chain shirt*

Earth Mastery (Ex): Nyxus gains a +1 bonus on attack and damage rolls if both he and his foe are touching the ground. If an opponent is airborne or waterborne, Nyxus takes a –4 penalty on attack and damage rolls. (These modifiers are not included in the statistics block.)

Obliterating Resonance (Su): As a standard action, Nyxus can set up a special vibration in a metal weapon or tool by striking it against a hard object. This vibration resonates with metal and stone and can cause severe structural damage in objects made from either of those two materials. Nyxus can use his obliterating resonance in one of two ways. The obliterating resonance must be used on the following round or it is lost.

Sunder (Ex): If Nyxus uses his obliterating resonance on a metal weapon, and then uses the weapon to sunder an opponent's metal weapon or shield, it ignores the hardness of the object and inflicts double damage.

Collapse (Ex): Nyxus can cause any 20-foot square of stone or earth to crumble and collapse. He need only strike the wall, floor, or ceiling with his resonating weapon or tool to cause a collapse, and he need not strike the area directly. Nyxus can target an area up to 60 feet away, as long as it is connected to a contiguous stone or earthen substance. For example, if he wished to collapse a patch of ceiling directly above an enemy's head, he could strike the wall, or even the floor it eventually connects to, as long as the patch of ceiling he wishes to effect is no more than 60 feet away. Listed below are the effects of collapsing ceilings, walls, and floors.

A 20-foot collapsing square of stone or earthen ceiling causes 6d6 points of bludgeoning damage to creatures directly beneath it. A DC 36 Reflex save halves this damage.

A 20-foot section of collapsing stone or earthen wall explodes outward in a 40-foot cone, causing 4d6 points of bludgeoning damage to creatures directly in front of it. A DC 36 Reflex save halves this damage.

A collapsing section of floor creates a 20-foot wide and 20-foot deep pit, and causes 2d6 points of falling damage to creatures that fall in. A DC 36 reflex save negates the damage.

Rock Throwing (Ex): Nyxus' thrown rock has a range increment of 180 ft.

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Summon Daemon (Sp): Once per day, Nyxus can attempt to summon 1d6 cryptodaemons or 1d3 terradaemons with a 60% chance of success. This is the equivalent of a 9th-level spell.

Weakening Gaze (Su): As a standard action, Nyxus can focus his single massive eye upon any one foe within 60 feet and drain the vitality and strength from his target. Creatures targeted by weakening gaze must succeed on a DC 29 Fortitude save or suffer 2d6 points of Strength damage. This damage cannot reduce a victim's Strength score below 0, but anyone reduced to Strength 0 is helpless. Creatures that are affected by this power or that successfully save against it cannot be affected again by Nyxus' weakening gaze for 24 hours.

Background

Nyxus serves Yaghur Hod as one of the four generals in charge of the Archodaemon's massive daemonic army. He is the de facto field general, and directs the army's movements on the field of battle, as well as personally commanding the legions of terradaemons that look to him as their true leader.

Terradaemons are a xenophobic, isolationist race, and the greatest among them, the bold and battle-hungry Nyxus, is no exception to this racial trend. Like his lesser brethren, Nyxus prefers solitude, or at the very least, the sole company of his own kind. Despite his prejudices and general misanthropy, Nyxus has a keen mind for battle, and understands the give and take of combat in a way that far eclipses others of his kind. Because of this ability, he has been forced into a role he is unaccustomed to, that of one of the four generals of Yaghur Hod's vast daemonic army.

Before the return of the great daemon, Nyxus had managed to shuck off some his racial xenophobia, and had serious designs on the title of Archodaemon. He lacked the magical skill of the daemon that held the throne before Yaghur Hod, the powerful Ozynthraxus, and he lacked the guile of his most ardent rival, the cacodaemon Turgon. However, these facts did not deter the iron willed Nyxus, and he sought the pinnacle of daemonokind with the stoic, uncompromising drive of his race. What he lacked in sorcery and diplomacy, he made up for in skill at arms, and there were few daemons in all of Gehenna or Hades that could stand against the massive terradaemon and his terrible maul.

Nyxus had also been doing something almost unheard of among terradaemons in order to secure his bid for the title of Archodaemon. He

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had been trying to unit all terradaemons beneath his banner, promising a genocidal purge of other daemonic races should he attain ultimate power. This doctrine, while appealing to the bigoted, xenophobic terradaemons did little to inspire a following among the other races of daemons. In fact, his rival Turgon, who led the powerful race of cacodaemons, used his enemy's extreme views to rally support to his own cause.

There is little doubt that Ozynthraxus, Turgon, and Nyxus would have eventually sought to destroy one another directly, but the return of Yaghur Hod, and the subsequent destruction of Ozynthraxus, left no doubt as to who would rule the destiny of daemon-kind. Yaghur Hod immediately recognized Nyxus' talents and chose him as one of the four generals that would lead his army. At first the stubborn Nyxus railed against service to the powerful Archodaemon, but Yaghur Hod unctuous persuasiveness, and his very sincere desire to lead all daemons to glory, soon cracked his hardened resolve, and he now serves the great daemon willingly and loyalty.

Nyxus continues his rivalry with Turgon, and is convinced that the powerful cacodaemon will betray Yaghur Hod. To this end, he has once again gone against his nature, and has been grooming the vicious and barbaric Zeeosh, master of the azodaemons, as an ally. His overtures have been well received, and the two powerful daemons currently conspire to kill Turgon, once Yaghur Hod has brought ultimate victory to the daemonic race.

Strategies and Tactics

Nyxus is a mighty juggernaut of daemonic power, and he and his maul of crushed the life from every creature foolish enough to stand against them. The great terradaemon relishes melee combat, and eagerly engages opponents willing to go toe-to-toe with him. However, Nyxus is no fool, and does not rush into battle recklessly or without being well prepared.

Nyxus typically begins combat by throwing stones at opponents. He does this until his enemies are within range of a charge, and then switches to melee. Before entering melee Nyxus casts stoneskin, and then targets a likely spellcaster with his weakening gaze, hoping to drain such a foe completely, leaving him helpless and unable to continue the fight. Once melee is joined, the mighty terradaemon makes good use of his Power Attack feat, routinely shaving 10 points from his attack roll to increase his damage out put by 20 points. He is also fond of sundering the weapons and shield of his opponents, or sending them flying with

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the Awesome Blow feat.

Nyxus will flee combat if he is reduced to 100 hit points or less, often using his obliterating resonance to open up pits beneath his enemy's feet to cover his escape. He is also more likely to flee a fight against airborne opponents, as he suffers a severe disadvantage against winged foes.

Terradaemon

This massive, ponderous creature resembles a giant with pebbly, gray skin and a single massive eye, lidless and staring, in the center of its blocky, misshapen head. It grips a crudely wrought iron maul in both meaty fists and wears a thick shirt of steel links.

Terradaemon (CR 9)

Always NE Large Outsider (Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +0; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft, true seeing; Listen +15, Spot +15
Language Abyssal, Infernal, telepathy 100 ft.

AC 29, touch 9, flat-footed 29 (-1 size, +15 natural, +5 armor)
hp 105 (10 HD); **DR** 10/good
Immune poison, sonic
Resist cold 10, fire 10; SR 19
Fort +13, **Ref** +7, **Will** +9

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares), burrow 20 ft.
Melee +1 cold iron maul +19/+14 (2d8+13/×3) or
Melee 2 slams +17 melee (1d8+8)
Ranged rock +9 (2d8+8)
Space 10 ft.; **Reach** 10 ft.
Base Atk +10; **Grp** +22
Atk Options Cleave, Improved Sunder, Power Attack, destructive resonance, earth mastery, rock throwing
Special Actions weakening gaze
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 12th)
At will – *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only), *magic stone*, *soften earth and stone*
1/day – *stoneskin*

Abilities Str 27, Dex 11, Con 23, Int 11, Wis 15, Cha 15
SQ daemon traits
Feats Cleave, Improved Sunder, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (maul)

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Skills Climb +20, Diplomacy +3, Intimidate +14, Jump +24, Knowledge (architecture and engineering) +11, Knowledge (the planes) +13, Listen +15, Search +0 (+2 with secret doors), Sense Motive +15, Spot +15, Survival +15 (+17 on other planes)

Possessions *+1 cold iron maul*, *+1 chain shirt*

Advancement 11-20 (Large); 21-30 (Huge)

Destructive Resonance (Su): As a standard action, a terradaemon can set up a special vibration in a metal weapon or tool by striking it against a hard object. This vibration resonates with metal and stone and can cause severe structural damage in objects made from either of those two materials. The terradaemon can use its destructive resonance in one of two ways. The destructive resonance must be used on the following round or it is lost.

Sunder (Ex): If a terradaemon uses his destructive resonance on a metal weapon, and then uses the weapon to sunder an opponent's metal weapon or shield, it ignores the hardness of the object.

Collapse (Ex): A terradaemon can cause any 10-foot square of stone or earth to crumble and collapse. The terradaemon need only strike the wall, floor, or ceiling with its resonating weapon or tool to cause a collapse, and it need not strike the area directly. The terradaemon can target an area up to 30 feet away, as long as it is connected to a contiguous stone or earthen substance. For example, a terradaemon wishing to collapse a patch of ceiling directly above an enemy's head could strike the wall, or even the floor it eventually connects to, as long as the patch of ceiling he wishes to effect is less than 30 feet away. Listed below are the effects of collapsing ceilings, walls, and floors. All save DCs are Constitution-based.

A 10-foot collapsing square of stone or earthen ceiling causes 3d6 points of bludgeoning damage to creatures directly beneath it. A DC 21 Reflex save halves this damage.

A 10-foot section of collapsing stone or earthen wall explodes outward in a 10-foot cone, causing 2d6 points of bludgeoning damage to creatures directly in front of it. A DC 21 Reflex save halves this damage.

A collapsing section of floor creates a 10-foot wide and 10-foot deep pit, and causes 1d6 points of falling damage to creatures that fall in. A DC 21 reflex save negates the damage.

Earth Mastery (Ex): A terradaemon gains a +1 bonus on attack and damage rolls if both it and its foe are touching the ground. If an opponent is airborne or waterborne, the terradaemon takes a –4 penalty on attack and damage rolls.

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(These modifiers are not included in the statistics block.)

Rock Throwing (Ex): A terradaemon's thrown rock as a range increment of 120 ft.

Summon Daemon (Sp): Once per day, a terradaemon can attempt to summon 1d4 cryptodaemons or another terradaemon with a 35% chance of success. This is the equivalent of a 3rd-level spell.

Weakening Gaze (Su): As a standard action, a terradaemon can focus its single massive eye upon any one foe within 60 feet and drain the vitality and strength from its target. Creatures targeted by weakening gaze must succeed on a DC 17 Fortitude save or suffer 2d6 points of Strength damage. This damage cannot reduce a victim's Strength score below 0, but anyone reduced to Strength 0 is helpless. Creatures that are affected by this power or that successfully save against it cannot be affected again by the same terradaemon's weakening gaze for 24 hours. The save DC is Charisma-based.

Terradaemons are large, powerful fiends with an affinity for elemental earth. They can be found in deep warrens and tunnels beneath the planes of Gehenna and Hades.

Strategies and Tactics

Terradaemons are brutal and direct combatants, enjoying nothing more than crushing their opponents flat with their heavy mauls. They are typically encountered alone, and are belligerent and bullying creatures, likely to attack for the simply joy of slaughter.

Typically, a lone terradaemon begins combat by hurling rocks at an opponent for a round or two, and then close for melee. Up close, a terradaemon uses its weakening gaze, targeting an enemy that appears to be strongest in melee. After that, it casts stoneskin and charges into battle with its maul. In melee, a terradaemon makes heavy use of the Power Attack feat, routinely shaving 5 points off of its attack bonus to add 10 points to its damage rolls. In addition, a lone terradaemon uses its destructive resonance to shatter opponents' weapons and shields, crushing even magical equipment with relative ease.

Groups of terradaemons are highly sought after by demonic and infernal armies, as the daemon's affinity with elemental earth allows them to severely weaken earth and stone structures. Terradaemons mercenaries typically operate in groups of four, and work as sappers, or occasionally heavy infantry. Many fortifications in the eternal war between devil and demon have been

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brought low by terradaemon mercenaries, and a large enough group of the daemons could conceivably bring down an entire city.

Typical Encounters

Terradaemons are loners by nature, and are usually encountered alone. They only group together at the behest of more powerful daemons, which sell their services to demonic and infernal armies.

Individual (EL 9): A lone terradaemon has managed to find a conduit to the Elemental Plane of Earth deep beneath the surface of Hades. From there, the daemon chanced upon another portal, this one to a deep cavern on the Prime Material Plane. The cavern is home to a small group of svirfneblin, and the sudden appearance of the daemon has caused great fear and consternation among the small humanoids. As of yet, the terradaemon is unaware of the furtive band of deep gnomes, but it is only a matter of time before it discovers its neighbors, and indulges its sinister appetites. The deep gnomes have sent messengers to nearby allies for aid, and they would certainly stop to treat with any adventurers they encountered along the way, offering a large sum of gems for the daemon's destruction.

Mercenary Unit (EL 13): A powerful duergar cleric has managed to gain the services of a terradaemon mercenary unit. The quartet of powerful daemons is to be unleashed upon a nearby dwarven fort, which overlooks and guards a precious trade route often used by the dwarves. The duergar cleric wishes to gain control of the fort and the road for his clan's merchant ventures, and will use the terradaemons to breach the walls and slay all inside. Adventurers escorting a dwarven merchant caravan into the Underdark must pass by the fort, and could easily chance upon the duergar cleric and his daemons on the road.

Ecology

Terradaemons are outsiders, and therefore have no need to eat, breathe, or sleep. However, they do enjoy the taste of certain minerals, especially salt and niter. They will greedily devour these substances, and will even accept large quantities of either mineral as payment for mercenary services.

Terradaemons are created through standard procreation between the two sexes, which are virtually indistinguishable from one another, or, on rare occasions, a lesser daemon will be promoted to the form of terradaemon as a reward for outstanding service. Infant terradaemons are fully formed

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at birth, and are always born in sets of three; they are identical to the adults save for their size. Terradaemon spawn are abandoned shortly after birth, as terradaemon mothers do not have any maternal instinct. However, sometimes an enterprising terradaemon female will sell her spawn to powerful daemon lords, who will then raise the young daemons as elite mercenaries.

Environment: Terradaemons are found on both Gehenna and Hades, although they are rarely encountered on the surface. Since terradaemon live deep underground, they are sometimes found on the Elemental Plane of Earth, traveling through portals found in their subterranean lairs. In addition, terradaemon mercenaries can be encountered on nearly any lower plane, serving at the whim of their employers.

Typical Physical Characteristics: A terradaemon stands roughly 12 feet tall and weighs nearly 8,000 pounds. Its body is blocky and crude, although massive, and its head is relatively small for its body. The single eye of the terradaemon is either a sickly yellow or a fiery red. Red-eyed terradaemons are those that began life as some lesser kind of daemon, and were then promoted to their present form, while those with yellow-eyes were born as terradaemons.

Society: Terradaemons are loners by nature and only gather in groups to mate or when forced into mercenary service by more powerful daemons. Terradaemons occupy a middle tier in daemonic society, and tend to bully the lesser forms of daemons and avoid the more powerful.

Young terradaemons that are not sold into mercenary service burrow into the hard, rocky soil of Hades or Gehenna with their massive, shovel-like hands. They seek to get as far beneath the earth as possible, both to avoid lower planar predators and to establish their own subterranean lair. Once a young terradaemon has found a suitable lair, such as a cavern or grotto, it will seal itself away by collapsing any tunnels or other entrances into its new home. There the juvenile daemon will stay, safe within its earthen cocoon, until it reaches maturity.

As an adult, a terradaemon will open up its lair, and then seek to drive off or kill any other terradaemons in the area in an attempt to expand its subterranean kingdom. The only exception to this violent isolationism is when a male terradaemon encounters a nearby female. In these instances, the male terradaemon will allow the female to remain near his lair, but only after she has agreed to serve as a permanent mating partner.

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Terradaemon mercenaries differ somewhat from their solitary brethren. They have had to learn to cooperate with one anther on some level, and to this end, they are far less belligerent than their solitary kin. Terradaemon mercenary units can become quite close knit, and they prefer the company of their own kind to a point that borders on xenophobia.

Typical Treasure

Terradaemons have standard treasure for their Challenge rating, or about 4,500 gold pieces. Most of this value will be tied up in the daemons equipment, although terradaemons have a fondness for gemstones, and will typically carry between 500 and 1,000 gp worth of stones.

For Player Characters

A terradaemon can be called with a *planar ally* spell. It can also be summoned with a *summon monster VIII* or a higher level *summon monster* spell. Treat a terradaemon as if it were on the 8th-level list of the *summon monster* table.

Terradaemons with Class Levels

Terradaemons that take levels in a character class almost always pursue fighter or barbarian, with barbarian being a heavy favorite. Terradaemon clerics are almost unheard of, and the few that do exist typically worship evil earth deities. Terradaemon clerics choose from the following domains: Earth, Evil, and Strength.

Spell Resistance: A terradaemon has a spell resistance equal to 19 + 1 per class level.

Level Adjustment: +4.

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Pyrak the Demon Lord

The demon before you is strikingly noble in bearing, although no less terrible in aspect. Its body features many of the elements of a great bird of prey, with grasping talons, a rapier-sharp beak, and two great wings easily capable of bearing the massive fiend aloft. The demon's feathers are a uniform dull gray, as is its great beak and talons. Its eyes blaze crimson, and within each you see the workings of a mind both great and terrible. The demon grips a sword of truly epic proportions, a two-handed monstrosity with a naked blade edged with silver.

Pyrak (CR 45)

Advanced Paragon Vrock Fighter 10
CE Huge Outsider (Chaotic, Extraplanar, Evil)
Init +18; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft.; Listen +61, Spot +61
Languages Abyssal, Aquan, Auran, Celestial, Common, Draconic, Ignan, Infernal, Terran, Undercommon, telepathy 300 ft.

AC 56, touch 42, flatfooted 56; uncanny dodge (–2 size, +10 Dex, +14 natural, +12 insight, +12 luck)
hp 1300 (40 HD), fast healing 20; **DR** 15/epic, good, and cold iron
Immune electricity, poison
Resistance acid 10, cold 10, fire 10, evasion; **SR** 70
Fort +46, **Ref** +40, **Will** +41

Speed 90 ft. (18 squares); fly 150 ft. (average)
Melee *Fiendbleeder* +90/+85/+80/+75 (4d6+56 plus 4d6 against lawful creatures plus 4d6 against lawful outsiders; 17–20) and bite +81 (4d6+29) and 2 talons +81 (1d8+29)
Melee 2 claws +81 (4d6+38) and bite +81 (3d6+29) and 2 talons +81 (1d8+29)
Space 15 ft.; **Reach** 15 ft.
Base Atk +40; **Grapple** +66
Atk Options Cleave, Dire Charge, Great Cleave, Improved Bull Rush, Improved Sunder, Power Attack, sneak attack +5d6
Special Actions dance of devastation, shattering screech, spores, *summon demon*
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 40th)
At will – *mirror image, telekinesis* (DC 26), *greater teleport* (self plus 200 pounds of objects only)
3/day – *greater dispel magic, haste, see invisibility*
1/day – *heroism*

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Abilities Str 47, Dex 30, Con 34, Int 29, Wis 32, Cha 32

SQ demon traits

Feats Cleave, Combat Reflexes, Great Cleave, Greater Weapon Focus (greatsword), Improved Bull Rush, Improved Critical (greatsword), Improved Initiative, Improved Multiattack, Improved Natural Weapon (bite), Improved Natural Weapon (claw), Improved Sunder, Multiattack, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (greatsword), Weapon Specialization (greatsword)

Epic Feats Blinding Speed, Devastating Critical (greatsword), Dire Charge, Improved Combat Reflexes, Overwhelming Critical (greatsword), Superior Initiative

Skills Balance +37, Bluff +38, Concentration +60, Diplomacy +58, Disguise +21 (+23 acting), Gather Information +36, Hide +45, Intimidate +66, Jump +74, Knowledge (arcana) +34, Knowledge (history) +34, Knowledge (the planes) +52, Knowledge (religion) +34, Listen +62, Move Silently +53, Search +57, Sense Motive +44, Spellcraft +54, Spot +62, Survival +54 (+56 following tracks, +56 on other planes), Tumble +37

Possessions *Fiendbleeder* (+7 gargantuan lawful outsider dread greatsword of anarchic power)

Dance of Devastation (Su): To use this ability, Pyrak and a group of at least three vrocks must join hands in a circle, dancing wildly and chanting. At the end of 3 rounds of dancing, a wave of crackling energy flashes outward in a 300-foot radius. All creatures except for demons within the radius take 5d6 points of damage per standard vrock in the circle, up to a maximum of 50d6 (Reflex DC 42 half). Stunning, paralyzing, or slaying one of the vrocks stops the dance.

Shattering Screech (Su): Once per hour, Pyrak can emit a piercing screech. All creatures except for demons within a 60-foot radius must succeed on a DC 42 Fortitude save or take 10d6 points of sonic damage and be stunned for 1d8 rounds. A successful save halves the sonic damage and negates the stunning.

Spores (Ex): Pyrak can release masses of spores from his body once every 3 rounds as a free action. The spores automatically deal 3d8 points of damage to all creatures adjacent to the demon lord. They then penetrate the skin and grow, dealing an additional 1d8 points of damage each round for 10 rounds. At the end of this time, the victim is covered with a tangle of viny growths. (The vines are harmless and wither away in 1d4 days.) A delay poison spell stops the spores' growth for its duration. Bless, neutralize poison, or remove disease kills the spores, as does sprinkling the victim with a vial of holy water.

Summon Demon (Sp): Once per day Pyrak can automatically to summon 1d8 vrocks, 2 marilith, or 1 balor. This ability is the equivalent of a 9th-level spell.

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Pyrak is a powerful demon lord that rules an entire Abyssal layer known as the Plains of Vrack. He is very active in the eternal conflict with the Nine Hells, and displayes many traits uncommon to demonkind, paramount among them: organization, tactical genius, and a true appreciation for loyalty among his minions.

Background

Eons ago, amid the endless chaos of the Abyss, a new demon, the first of its kind, clawed its way from the spawning pits to begin a reckless ascent to power. A bird-like fiend with huge feathered wings, this new demon was a potent addition to the armies of the Abyss, combining tearing claws and a slashing beak with a plethora of magical abilities. A balor, whose name has been lost to history, was on hand to witness the birthing of the new demon and being the ranking fiend, seized the honor of naming the beast. "Vrock," the balor pronounced the new demon, a single guttural syllable in the foul tongue of demons. The name was a combination of two Abyssal words, "v'rog" meaning wing and "uckk" meaning death. The new demon was aptly named, "winged death."

The balor, seeing an opportunity to increase his station, took possession of the new demon immediately and brought the beast before his master, the demon lord Pazuzu. Pazuzu was pleased with the new demon's form, as it resembled his own, and he took the first vrock into his domain to study the new beast's capabilities.

The vrock thrived under the careful scrutiny of Pazuzu, learning its abilities and proving to be a potent new addition to chaotic ranks of demonkind. Pazuzu, satisfied with his new charge, sought a way to breed more of the beasts. The demon prince sent the first vrock back to the spawning pits, and after a number of blasphemous rituals and unthinkable ceremonies, began to produce more of the new demon. Soon Pazuzu had a legion of vrocks and looked to the territory of his neighboring demon lords with a calculating eye.

Pazuzu first loosed his vrocks on a minor demon lord named Uzelnak, who held a vast stretch of barren Abyssal plain bordering Pazuzu's own demesne and commanded a ragtag army of minor demons. Pazuzu's vrocks descended on Uzelnak's territory en masse, blotting out the Abyssal sky with a dense cloud of feathered death. The horde of vrocks descended upon Uzelnak's army of dretches and other lesser fiends and annihilated them.

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His army shattered, Uzelnak was forced to flee his domain in utter defeat.

Pazuzu was well pleased with this victory, but had no interest in the abandoned domain of Uzelnak. Instead, he granted the arid stretch of the Abyss to his new servants, the vrocks. The new demons were remarkably obedient to their master, relying on his patronage to keep them from the machinations of other powerful demon lords. Pazuzu's reputation and power allowed the new demons to remain free from any outside influence. Unfortunately this also allowed them to consolidate their power.

Shortly after the defeat of Uzelnak, the original vrock demon, now called Pyrak, quietly convinced the rest of his brethren to swear allegiance to him. Pyrak was a unique creature, and his abilities were similar to a standard vrock only much more powerful. Pazuzu was kept unaware of Pyrak's enhanced abilities, and the wily vrock took great pains to keep his powers hidden. Pyrak, like all demons, hungered for power, and having seen the influence and dominance exerted by Pazuzu, craved the same status for himself.

Pyrak had another secret that his master had no knowledge of. The big vrock had claimed a powerful enchanted sword from the deposed demon lord Uzelnak, who was unaware of its power. When the blade fell Pyrak's hands, the weapon, possessed of an intellect of its own, sensed a kindred soul and revealed all of its staggering power to the demon. *Fiendbleeder* was the sword's name, and it had been forged for a single purpose, to aid its demonic masters in the never-ending war with the devils of the Nine Hells. *Fiendbleeder* added considerably to Pyrak's growing strength and served as an indomitable symbol of authority among the other vrocks.

For centuries Pyrak served Pazuzu as a general in an ever-growing army of vrocks, striking fear into the hearts of his master's rivals. But Pazuzu's bullying could not be tolerated forever and two great demon lords agreed to put aside their differences to deal with the menace of the demon prince and his vrocks. Dagon and Orcus had long been enemies, but now that their own domains were in jeopardy, the desperate demon lords had no choice but to pool their resources. As fate would have it, they would need to do very little to stem the tide of invasion. Pyrak, knowing that he and his vrocks would soon be sent against Pazuzu's most powerful rivals, betrayed his master, and secretly struck a bargain with both Dagon and Orcus. In exchange for leaving their domains in peace, the two demon lords would provide Pyrak with additional support in the form of a demonic army

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pooled from both of their considerable resources. This army, assisted by Pyrak and his vrocks, would storm the Citadel of Wings, the fortified keep of Pazuzu.

Pazuzu, who prided himself on knowing everything about his domain and servants, was stunned when Pyrak led the largest Abyssal army in memory to his doorstep. Enraged at the betrayal, Pazuzu attempted to salvage some of his lost honor and brazenly challenged Pyrak to single combat. With his dominance still untested, Pyrak had no choice but to accept Pazuzu's duel.

The confrontation that followed was a spectacular mid-air battle, with both fiends pushing the limits of their own abilities in an attempt to gain the upper hand. The amassed army of demons watched with great interest as the two mighty fiends ripped and slashed at each other, both combatants very aware that the loser of the conflict would be banished at best and more than likely destroyed. It was *Fiendbleeder* that finally decided the outcome of the battle, for despite all of his considerable battle prowess and magical ability, Pazuzu could not stand against the mighty blade. The combat ended abruptly as, Pazuzu, severely wounded, ripped open a gate to the prime material plane and fled his domain, and the Abyss, in total defeat.

A victorious Pyrak claimed the Citadel of Wings for himself and his followers. A new power had emerged in the Abyss and both Dagon and Orcus, perhaps foolishly, honored their agreement with the mighty vrock and left him to rule in Pazuzu's stead. In the millennia that followed his victory, Pyrak has continued to grow and power and is now one of the most powerful demons in the Abyss. He controls an entire Abyssal layer; a combination of what was once Pazuzu's and the deposed demon lord Uzelnak's. The layer is known as the Plains of Vrack, and it is little more than a flat featureless plain swarming with flying demons and other evil, winged creatures.

Pyrak has shown little interest in the prime material plane and instead focuses his attention on the eternal war with the devils of the Nine Hells. The powerful demon has led many successful raids into Avernus, the first level of the hells, and has laid waste to entire armies of devils, aided by an army of elite vrocks called Dreadwings and his vicious greatsword. Pyrak's relations with other mighty demons and demon lords are remarkably passive, and he is quite content to be left to his own devices and accord the same courtesy to his neighbors.

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Strategies and Tactics

As an ancient demon lord, Pyrak commands near god-like power that far outstrips even the mightiest of mortal abilities. Typically, Pyrak does not bother with the few mortals that have dared to enter his domain, letting his legions of vrocks and other demons deal with such interlopers.

If forced into direct confrontation, Pyrak begins combat by loosing a shattering screech, hoping to damage and incapacitate as many foes as possible. Against weaker opponents, such as mortal adventurers, this tactic is all the demon lord typically needs, leaving him with little to do but dispatch his near helpless foes.

Pyrak rarely makes use of his spell-like abilities, although he occasionally casts *haste* or *heroism* upon himself if preparing for a protracted battle, or a confrontation with a very powerful foe. He does, however, make use of *Fiendbleeder's* array of abilities before entering combat, boosting all of his physical ability scores by +10.

Pyrak, unlike other demon lords, is fond of melee combat, as it allows him to bring the awesomely powerful *Fiendbleeder* to bear. His incredible skill with the weapon, coupled with its already fearsome abilities, has allowed the demon lord to win battles and defeat foes far beyond his own personal power, as evidenced by his usurpation of Pazuzu's throne and lands.

Pyrak is fond of using Dire Charge to open melee combat, charging the strongest looking opponent and leveling a full attack routine on the unfortunate individual. Pyrak can routinely deal out over 300 points of damage with a single full attack, often enough to reduce his target to quivering chum in a matter of seconds. Against lawful and evil outsiders, *Fiendbleeder's* hated foe, the demon lord is a veritable whirlwind of destruction, and can devastate entire legions of devils without aid, or even bring low one of the mighty archdevils in single combat.

Servants & Enemies

As a demon lord and master of an entire Abyssal plane, Pyrak commands a near limitless horde of demons and other evil creatures. The Plains of Vrack are home to multitudes of evil flying creatures, from the more commonplace demons, such as vrocks, to fiendish versions of Prime Material monstrosities, such as manticores, harpies, perytons, and gargoyles.

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Pyrak's favored servants, however, are an elite group of vrocks known as the Dreadwings. The Dreadwings number close to two thousand strong, and each member is an elite example of its breed. Most Dreadwings have class levels in ranger, and have chosen lawful or evil outsiders as their favored enemy, making them incredibly lethal in the war against the Nine Hells.

In addition to his lesser demonic servants, Pyrak is attended by two demons of singular power and personality: Hedrenatherax, a mighty balor, and Heskera, a marilith sorcerer. Hedrenatherax acts as Pyrak's major domo and enforces the demon lord's will when direct, brutal action is necessary to accomplish a goal. Heskera, on the other hand, often leads Pyrak's abyssal army into combat with the fiends of the Nine Hells. In addition, the powerful marilith acts as a proxy to her liege, using her diplomatic skills to smooth over differences with rival demon lords to allow Pyrak to focus on the war with the devils.

Oddly enough, Pyrak has few enemies in the Abyss, and maintains pacts of non-aggression with many other demon lords. His own personal power, and lack of concern with the political matters, keeps even the mightiest Abyssal rulers from intruding in his domain, or meddling in his affairs. Only Pazuzu holds any real animosity towards Pyrak, but he currently lacks the means to challenge his ancient enemy, having lost much of his former influence and power after his defeat and subsequent flight from the Abyss.

Pyrak's true enemies are the Nine Hells' regimented legions of devils and their masters. In the endless conflict between the Abyss and the infernal planes, only Pyrak, of all demon lords, has achieved any real victory against his diabolical foes. Hundreds of thousands of devils have been destroyed by Pyrak and his horde, and even the mighty archdevils themselves hesitate to challenge the mighty demon.

Pyrak has virtually no following on the Prime Material plane, and has little motivation to pursue any kind of worship. Most mortals mistake Pyrak for Pazuzu, a fact that the latter is happy to see continue. The few isolated clerics worshipping Pyrak have access to the following domains: Air, Chaos, Evil, and War. Pyrak's favorite weapon is the greatsword.

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Fiendbleeder

+7 gargantuan lawful outsider dread greatsword of anarchic power; AL CE; Int 40, Wis 40, Cha 30; Speech, Telepathy, 240 ft. vision and hearing, read all languages, *read magic*; Ego score 99.

Primary Abilities:

Wielder has free use of evasion

Wielder has free use of uncanny dodge

Wielder can *detect law* at will

Wielder can *see invisibility* at will

Extraordinary Abilities:

Wielder can use *true seeing* at will

Wielder can use *protection from law* at will

Wielder gains sneak attack +5d6

Awesome Powers:

1/day – intensified *bull's strength* (wielder only; +10 enhancement bonus to Strength)

1/day – intensified *cat's grace* (wielder only; +10 enhancement bonus to Dexterity)

1/day – intensified *bear's endurance* (wielder only; +10 enhancement bonus to Constitution)

Special Purpose: Defeat/slay devils

Dedicated Power: Destruction (DC 32)

Appearance: *Fiendbleeder* is a greatsword of truly monstrous proportions, measuring nearly twenty feet long and weighing over one hundred pounds. Its blade is a matte black, save for the barest hint of silver at its razor edge, but it is otherwise rather plain in appearance.

Personality: The dread sword *Fiendbleeder* is a weapon of singular power and influence, commanding near god-like control over its wielders. Its origins are unknown, although it does seem to have a relationship with another epically powerful weapon, the great spear *Dreadskewer*. *Fiendbleeder's* vast and alien intellect is concerned only with the destruction of its hated foes – the devils of the Nine Hells. To carry out its aims, the sword chooses only the most powerful creatures to wield it – historically demon lords have been its pawn of choice – and forces them to engage in endless conflict with devils and their minions.

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Fiendbleeder is petty and malicious, and uses its wielders as a simple extension of its will. It has no remorse, compassion, or empathy towards its users, and all of the unfortunate creatures to wield *Fiendbleeder* have either been destroyed or left as empty, mindless shells. The sword brooks no impudence or rebellion from those who wield it, and its incredible power ensures that even the strongest minds are but reeds in the wind, bending effortlessly to its monstrous will.

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Turgon, Cacodaemon Commander

This tall crocodile-headed fiend wears thick black robes belted with a sash of crimson silk. A cloak of brilliant purple cascades from the daemons shoulders and bears a number of twisting gilded runes. A jewel-encrusted scimitar and a plain iron rod are the only apparent armaments carried by the fiend, although the dozens of needle-pointed teeth that line its jaws seem quite serviceable should violence become necessary.

Turgon (CR 30)

Advanced Cacodaemon Sorcerer 5/Archmage 5
NE Large Outsider (Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +6; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft; Listen +31, Spot +31
Language Abyssal, Aquan, Celestial, Common, Draconic, Ignan, Infernal, telepathy 100 ft.
Aura magic flux (20 ft.)

AC 35, touch 11, flat-footed 33 (-1 size, +2 Dex, +15 natural, +6 armor, +3 ring)
hp 389 (34 HD); **DR** 10/good
Immune acid, poison
Resist cold 10, fire 10, electricity 10; SR 45 (see below)
Fort +23, **Ref** +18, **Will** +26

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares)
Melee +3 spell storing scimitar +36/+31/+26/+21 (1d8+8/18-20) and bite +27 (1d6+2 plus spell theft)
Space 10 ft.; **Reach** 10 ft.
Base Atk +28; **Grp** +37
Atk Options arcane fire, spell theft
Special Actions mastery of elements, mastery of shaping, spell smite 3/day, summon daemon
Combat Gear *potion of cat's grace*, *potion of cure serious wounds* (2)
Sorcerer Spells Known (CL 22nd)

9th (7/day) – *dominate monster* (DC 30), *energy drain* (DC 31), *meteor swarm* (DC 32)
8th (6/day) – *dimensional lock*, *greater shout* (DC 31), *horrid wilting* (DC 30)
7th (7/day) – *force cage*, *symbol of turning*, *symbol of weakness* (DC 29)
6th (7/day) – *acid fog*, *contingency*, *eyebite* (DC 28)
5th (8/day) – *cone of cold* (DC 28), *feeblemind* (DC 26), *magic jar* (DC 27), *wall of force*

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4th (8/day) – *black tentacles*, *contagion* (DC 26), *enervation*, *stoneskin*

3rd (9/day) – *fly*, *fireball* (DC 26), *lightning bolt* (DC 26), *vampiric touch*

2nd (9/day) – *acid arrow*, *eagle's splendor*, *resist energy*, *scorching ray*, *web* (DC 23)

1st (9/day) – *expeditious retreat*, *mage armor*, *magic missile*, *ray of enfeeblement*, *shield*

0 (6/day) – *acid splash*, *arcane mark*, *daze* (DC 21), *detect magic*, *light*, *message*, *open/close*, *ray of frost*, *read magic*

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 24th)

At will – *alter self*, *greater dispel magic*, *greater teleport* (self plus 50 lb. of objects only), *obscuring mist*, *scrying*, *shocking grasp*, *see invisibility*, *wall of fire*, *wall of stone*

3/day – *delayed blast fireball* (DC 30), *freezing sphere* (DC 29), *prismatic spray* (DC 28)

1/day – *horrid wilting* (DC 30), *polar ray*

Abilities Str 20, Dex 14, Con 24, Int 22, Wis 18, Cha 32

SQ daemon traits, scaling spell resistance, spell power (2)

Feats Combat Casting, Extend Spell, Eschew Material, Greater Spell Focus (evocation), Greater Spell Penetration, Improved Initiative, Maximize Spell, Skill Focus (Spellcraft), Spell Focus (evocation), Spell Focus (necromancy), Spell Penetration, Weapon Focus (scimitar)

Skills Appraise +6 (+8 potions), Bluff +48, Concentration +44, Craft (alchemy) +26, Decipher Script +33, Diplomacy +42, Disguise +38 (+40 acting), Listen +31, Knowledge (arcana) +51, Knowledge (the planes) +43, Intimidate +40, Search +42, Sense Motive +31, Spellcraft +53, Spot +31, Survival +31 (+33 following tracks, +33 on other planes)

Possessions combat gear plus *+3 spell storing scimitar*, *bracers of armor +6*, *ring of protection +3*, *cloak of Charisma +6*, *greater metamagic rod (maximize)*

Advancement 15-28 (Large); 23-42 (Huge)

Arcane Fire (Su): Turgon can change arcane spell energy into arcane fire, manifesting it as a bolt of raw magical energy. The bolt is a ranged touch attack with long range (400 feet + 40 feet/level) that deals 5d6 points of damage plus 1d6 points of damage per level of the spell used to create the effect.

Magic Flux (Su): Turgon radiates an aura of magic static out to 20 feet. Creatures within this aura (except other cacodaemons) attempting to cast spells or use spell-like abilities must succeed at a Concentration check (DC = 20 + spell level) or lose the spell or the daily use of the spell-like ability.

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Mastery of Elements: Turgon can alter an arcane spell when cast so that it utilizes a different element from the one it normally uses. This ability can only alter a spell with the acid, cold, fire, electricity, or sonic descriptor. The spell's casting time is unaffected. Turgon decides whether to alter the spell's energy type and chooses the new energy type when he begins casting.

Mastery of Shaping: Turgon can alter area and effect spells that use one of the following shapes: burst, cone, cylinder, emanation, or spread. The alteration consists of creating spaces within the spell's area or effect that are not subject to the spell. The minimum dimension for these spaces is a 5-foot cube. Furthermore, any shapeable spells have a minimum dimension of 5 feet instead of 10 feet.

Scaling Spell-Resistance (Su): Turgon is highly resistant to magical attack, especially low-level spells and effects. He has a spell resistance of 45 against 0 and 1st-level spells. This spell resistance degrades when matched against higher-level spells by 3 points per spell level above 1st. The table shows Turgon's exact spell resistance by spell level.

Spell Level	SR
0, 1st	45
2nd	42
3rd	39
4th	36
5th	33
6th	30
7th	27
8th	24
9th	21

Spell Power: Turgon has increased his caster level by +2 (for purposes of determining level-dependent spell variables such as damage dice or range, and caster level checks only).

Spell-Smite (Su): Three times per day, Turgon can imbue any of his spells or spell-like abilities with an additional, damaging effect called a spell-smite. Using spell smite is a free action, and confers one of the following enhancements (Turgon's choice) to the spell.

Chain: Turgon can imbue any ranged targeted spell that inflicts damage with the chain ability. A chain spell inflicts full damage to its initial target, and then jumps to up to 10 additional targets within 30 feet, all of which suffer half the damage inflicted to the primary target. A saving throw of the appropriate type (if applicable) can be made by all secondary targets for half damage. If a spell imbued with the chain ability requires a successful ranged attack, then Turgon must succeed at the same ranged attack roll for all secondary targets. For example, if he targets a foe with scorching ray and succeeds at the ranged touch attack, the primary target takes 4d6 points of fire damage, and then he must hit each of up to 10 secondary targets with a ranged touch attack to inflict half the rolled damage dealt to the primary target.

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Cursed: A spell imbued with the cursed ability affects its target or targets with a bestow curse spell if a Will save (DC = 21+ spell level) is not made. The Will save is in addition to any other saving throw normally required by the spell.

Excruciating: A spell imbued with the excruciating ability that inflicts any damage upon its target or targets forces the affected creatures to make a Fortitude saving throw (DC = 21+ spell level) in addition to any saving throw normally required by the spell or suffer terrible, wracking pain. This pain imposes a –4 penalty on all attack rolls, skill checks, and ability check for one round per spell level.

Spell Theft (Su): A spellcaster struck by Turgon's bite attack must succeed on a DC 38 Will save or lose one random spell from his prepared list, or one daily use of a random spell level. Turgon gains the ability to cast the lost spell (sorcerers and other spontaneous casters choose one random spell from the lost spell level) on the following round as a free action at the same caster level as the spellcaster it was stolen from. Turgon must use the stolen spell on the following round; otherwise it dissipates into the ether and is lost.

Summon Daemon (Sp): Once per day, Turgon can attempt to summon 1d4 additional cacodaemons or 1d10 cryptodaemons with a 60% chance of success. This is the equivalent of a 9th-level spell.

Turgon is the greatest of Yaghur Hod's generals. He is a shrewd politician and commands the loyalty of the sorcerous race of cacodaemons.

Background

Turgon is a daemon that had serious design upon the title of Archodaemon before Yaghur Hod returned and crushed any hope of attaining such a vaunted position. The wily and powerful fiend had managed to subvert Ozynthraxus' power base by currying the favor of his cacodaemon brethren, and was poised to mount a coup against the current master of the daemons.

With his smooth politicking, especially among his own kind, and his considerable magical ability, it is likely that Turgon would have ousted Ozynthraxus and claimed the title of Archodaemon with little difficulty. His only true rival to the throne was Nyxus, a powerful terradaemon, but while Nyxus could also claim the support of his particular daemonic race, he lacked the ability to thwart Turgon in the political arena.

With the return of Yaghur Hod, Turgon was left with no choice but to

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put his plans on hold, perhaps permanently, and accept a position as one of the great daemon's generals. He was tasked with leading his fellow cacodaemons and often acted as a mouthpiece for Yaghur Hod, using his skill at diplomacy and political maneuvering to gain favor for his new master.

Turgon serves Yaghur Hod ably enough, but he is hardly satisfied with his subservient role to the great daemon. He understands that his own power is woefully insufficient to challenge Yaghur Hod directly, but as always, Turgon maneuvers behind the scenes, seeking advantage and opportunity. Should the chance to topple Yaghur Hod come along, as unlikely as that seems, the powerful cacodaemon would certainly seize upon such an opportunity. Oddly enough, Yaghur Hod is quite aware of Turgon's duplicitous nature, although he tolerates it because the cacodaemon is a useful asset.

Turgon continues his rivalry with Nyxus, who has been appointed to a position equal to his own under Yaghur Hod's new regime. Although he takes no direct action against his old enemy, Turgon works to undermine the terradaemon's authority, and opposes, quote vociferously, any plan of action proposed by his heated rival.

Strategies and Tactics

Although he loathes combat and direct confrontation, Turgon has been forced into violent and often deadly situations in his role as commander of the cacodaemons. Yaghru Hod uses the sorcerous fiends as mobile artillery pieces, and Turgon is calls upon to organize and lead the forces on the battlefield.

When combat is expected, Turgon takes no chances and shrouds his body in as many protective spells as he can. His protective enchantments always include extended versions of *expeditious retreat, mage armor, shield,* and *stoneskin.* In addition, the powerful cacodaemon always has at least one *contingency* in place that *teleports* him to safety if his falls below 50 hit points.

In battle, Turgon attempts to dispatch foes from a distance and as quickly as possible. He makes heavy use of his spell smite ability, favoring chain versions of *acid arrow, lightning bolt,* and *scorching ray.* He also frequently uses mastery of elements to change the energy type of his destructive spells to sonic, an energy form that few fiends can resist. Turgon is also fond of using *dominate monster* to turn enemies into allies,

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thereby decreasing the danger to his self, a concept near and dear to the cacodaemons black heart.

Only on the rarest occasions will Turgon actually enter melee combat. However, when forced to undertake such undignified action, the powerful cacodaemon often surprises his opponents with his skill at arms. His *+3 spell storing scimitar* is usually charged with *vampiric touch,* giving him a quick healing boost should he need it.

If a battle seems to be heading in a direction that could be dangerous to Turgon, he does not hesitate to flee. If unable *teleport* away, he covers his tracks with spells such as *acid fog*, *black tentacles,* or *obscuring mist.*

Cacodaemon

This large, humanoid fiend has the head of demonic crocodile, all scales and sharp, yellow teeth. It wears thick black robes and a bright crimson cloak, hiding much of its towering body. A large, curved sword and a short, iron rod are thrust through a red sash at the scaly fiend's waist.

Cacodaemon (CR 15)

Always NE Large Outsider (Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +5; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft; Listen +19, Spot +19
Language Abyssal, Celestial, Common, Draconic, Infernal, telepathy 100 ft.
Aura magic flux (20 ft.)

AC 28, touch 11, flat-footed 27 (–1 size, +1 Dex, +15 natural, +2 armor, +1 ring)
hp 119 (14 HD); DR 10/good
Immune acid, poison
Resist cold 10, fire 10, electricity 10; **SR** 35 (see below)
Fort +13, **Ref** +10, **Will** +11

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares)
Melee *+1 spell storing scimitar* +21/+16/+11 (1d8+6/18-20) and
bite +13 (1d6+2 plus spell theft)
Space 10 ft.; **Reach** 10 ft.
Base Atk +14; **Grp** +23
Atk Options spell theft
Special Actions spell smite 3/day, summon daemon
Combat Gear *potion of cat's grace*, *potion of cure serious wounds* (2)
Sorcerer Spells Commonly Known (CL 10th)
5th (4/day) – *cone of cold* (DC 20)

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4th (6/day) – *enervation*, *stoneskin*

3rd (7/day) – *fly*, *fireball* (DC 18), *lightning bolt* (DC 18)

2nd (7/day) – *eagle's splendor*, *resist energy*, *scorching ray*, *web* (DC 17)

1st (8/day) – *expeditious retreat*, *mage armor*, *magic missile*, *ray of enfeeblement*, *shield*

0 (6/day) – *acid splash*, *arcane mark*, *daze* (DC 15), *detect magic*, *light*, *message*, *open/close*, *ray of frost*, *read magic*

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 15th)

At will – *alter self*, *greater dispel magic*, *greater teleport* (self plus 50 lb. of objects only), *obscuring mist*, *scrying*, *shocking grasp*, *see invisibility*, *wall of fire*, *wall of stone*

3/day – *delayed blast fireball* (DC 22), *freezing sphere* (DC 21), *prismatic spray* (DC 22)

1/day – *horrid wilting* (DC 23), *polar ray*

Abilities Str 21, Dex 12, Con 19, Int 18, Wis 15, Cha 21

SQ scaling spell resistance

Feats Combat Casting, Empower Spell, Eschew Material, Improved Initiative, Weapon Focus (scimitar)

Skills Bluff +21, Concentration +21, Decipher Script +21, Diplomacy +25, Disguise +4 (+6 acting), Listen +19, Knowledge (arcana) +29, Knowledge (the planes) +21, Intimidate +23, Search +21, Sense Motive +19, Spellcraft +31, Spot +19, Survival +2 (+4 following tracks, +4 on other planes)

Possessions combat gear plus +1 spell storing scimitar, bracers of armor +2, ring of protection +1, cloak of Charisma +2, lesser metamagic rod (enlarge)

Advancement 15-28 (Large); 23-42 (Huge)

Magic Flux (Su): A cacodaemon radiates an aura of magic static out to 20 feet. Creatures within this aura (except other cacodaemons) attempting to cast spells or use spell-like abilities must succeed at a Concentration check (DC = 20 + spell level) or lose the spell or the daily use of the spell-like ability.

Scaling Spell Resistance (Su): A cacodaemon is highly resistant to magical attack, especially low-level spells and effects. It has a spell resistance of 35 against 1st-level spells. This spell resistance degrades when matched against higher-level spells by 3 points per spell level above 1st. The table shows the

Spell Level	SR
0, 1st	35
2nd	32
3rd	29
4th	26
5th	23
6th	20
7th	17
8th	14
9th	11

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daemon's exact spell resistance by spell level.

Spell-Smite (Su): Three times per day, a cacodaemon can imbue any of its spells or spell-like abilities with an additional, damaging effect called a spell-smite. Using this ability is a free action that confers one of the following improvements (casters's choice) to the spell.

Chain: A cacodaemon can imbue any ranged targeted spell that inflicts damage with the chain ability. A chain spell inflicts full damage to its initial target, and then jumps to up to 10 additional targets within 30 feet, all of which suffer half the damage inflicted to the primary target. A saving throw of the appropriate type (if applicable) can be made by all secondary targets for half damage. If a spell imbued with the chain ability requires a successful ranged attack, then the cacodaemon must succeed at the same ranged attack roll for all secondary targets. For example, if cacodaemon targets a foe with scorching ray and succeeds at the ranged touch attack, the primary target takes 4d6 points of fire damage, and the cacodaemon must hit each of up to 10 secondary targets with a ranged touch attack to inflict half the rolled damage dealt to the primary target.

Cursed: A spell imbued with the cursed ability affects its target or targets with a bestow curse spell if a Will save (DC = 15+ spell level) is not made. The Will save is in addition to any other saving throw normally required by the spell.

Excruciating: A spell imbued with the excruciating ability that inflicts any damage upon its target or targets forces the affected creatures to make a Fortitude saving throw (DC = 15+ spell level) in addition to any saving throw normally required by the spell or suffer terrible, wracking pain. This pain imposes a –4 penalty on all attack rolls, skill checks, and ability check for one round per spell level.

Spell Theft (Su): A spellcaster struck by a cacodaemon's bite attack must succeed on a DC 22 will save or lose one random spell from his prepared list, or one daily use of a random spell level. The cacodaemon gains the ability to cast the lost spell (sorcerers and other spontaneous casters choose one random spell from the lost spell level) on the following round as a free action at the same caster level as the spellcaster it was stolen from. The cacodaemon must use the stolen spell on the following round; otherwise it dissipates into the ether and is lost. The save DC is Charisma-based.

Summon Daemon (Sp): Once per day, a cacodaemon can attempt to summon another cacodaemon or 1d4 cryptodaemons with a 40% chance of success. This is the equivalent of a 7th-level spell.

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Skills: Cacodaemons have a +8 racial bonus on Knowledge (arcana) and Spellcraft checks.

Cacodaemons are powerful, magically gifted fiends that serve as mobile siege units in daemonic and other fiendish armies.

Strategies and Tactics

Intelligent and powerful, cacodaemons are truly daunting foes that can decimate enemies with barrages of magic energy, or even slash them to ribbons with their great, silver scimitars. A cacodaemon typically starts of combat by testing his foes abilities, usually by targeting them with a minor destructive spell, such as *fireball* or *magic missile*. If an opponent survives the initial assault relatively unscathed, the cacodaemon attacks will begin to escalate in intensity. More powerful offensive spells, such as *delayed blast fireball, polar ray,* and *freezing sphere,* will be piled upon an opponent until he succumbs or proves resistant to such attacks.

Against obviously powerful foes, such as a group of adventurers, a cacodaemon begins combat with an area *greater dispel magic*, hoping to nullify some of its opponents' defenses. The cacodemon then bolsters its own defensive capabilities with spells such as *mage armor, shield,* and *stoneskin*, and place itself out of easy reach with *fly* or *expeditious retreat*. Once its defenses are set in place, the cacodaemon unleashes its full arsenal of destructive spells, empowering them with spell-smite where applicable, and focusing offensive magic on other spellcasters.

Cacodaemons dislike melee, and only enter into close combat when there is no other choice. In melee, a cacodaemon attempts to bite a spellcaster each round, hoping to steal a powerful spell for use against its enemies on the following round. Most cacodaemons place an obfuscating spell such as *obscuring mist* or *web* within their *spell storing scimitars,* unleashing the spell to cover an escape.

Cacodaemons do not fight to the death if they can help it, and *teleport* away if a battle seems unwinnable.

Sample Encounter

Cacodaemons are often encountered in small groups in fiendish armies. Typically a cadre of four cacodaemons will hire themselves out as a mercenary unit, supporting each other with defensive magic, while

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slamming the opposing force with barrages of magical energy. Lone cacodaemons are usually found in service to a powerful daemon lord, often acting as an advisor, or even a war leader. In addition, a single cacodaemon is sometimes summoned to the Prime Material Plane by a powerful spellcaster. Often as not, a summoned cacodaemon will outwit and slay its summoner, and then set itself up as a petty, daemonic lord, gathering evil forces from the surrounding area.

Lord Zangarash (EL 15): An enterprising cacodaemon named Zangarash has begun building a small empire of evil out in the desert wastes. The powerful fiend was summoned by a foolhardy wizard some years ago, and slew his summoner after finding a small imperfection in the elder mage's summoning circle. Now Zangarash resides in the wizard's tower, and has begun to amass a fair size horde of humanoids, minor demons, and other monsters with the intent of expanding his burgeoning empire.

Ecology

Cacodaemons are an advanced form of daemon-kind, promoted from lesser daemons that exemplify the daemonic virtues of greed, selfishness, and an overriding desire to spread the taint of evil. At the top tier of daemonic life, cacodaemons command the respect and fear of lesser fiends, and can often be found bullying their lesser brethren, or commanding them on the battlefields of the lower planes.

Cacodaemons prefer to operate alone when not selling their services to other fiendish races, but often join together in small mercenary groups when joining the armies of the Nine Hells or the Abyss. These small groups ensure that individual cacodaemons can support one another in combat, and typically, allow the cacodaemons to command a higher price for their services.

Cacodaemons do not reproduce naturally; they are created from lesser daemons, or very rarely, from a truly vile, neutral evil petitioner that commanded significant arcane power while a mortal. Cacodaemons that perform well may be offered another promotion to the next tier of daemonic life, and beyond that, the glimmering hope of achieving the unique status of Archodaemon.

Environment: Cacodaemons can be found on nearly any lower plane, but are most common in Gehenna. A large number of the sorcerous fiends serve the current Archodaemon, Ozynthraxus, in his tower amid the

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smoking peaks of the mountainous plane.

Physical Characteristics: Cacodaemons are large, reptilian humanoids, with the heads of fiendish crocodiles. A typical specimen stands just over 8 feet tall and weighs nearly 400 pounds. Most cacodaemons wear voluminous black robes and carry ornate, silver-edged scimitars.

Society: Cacodaemons are a very ambitious race of fiends, and strive mightily to grow powerful and make the transition to the next phase of daemonic life. However, most cacodaemons are not above working with one another to achieve greater and more prestigious goals, and they will often form mercenary units and sell their services to the highest bidder. This is not to say that cacodaemons trust or even like one another, and individuals will happily betray a fellow if it advances their own status in the daemonic hierarchy.

Cacodaemons are one of the most common daemons found in the armies of other lower planar creatures. The devils of the Nine Hells especially value cacodaemon mercenaries and will pay significant amounts of larvae and magical items to obtain their services. Cacodaemons view their mercenary careers as the best and fastest way to advance their own prestige and power, despite the possible risks to life and limb.

In personality, cacodaemons are rather unsubtle and straightforward. While they certainly have the ability to lie, and lie well, most find political intrigue to be drudgework, and avoid it when they can. Cacodaemons enjoy direct, brutal confrontation, and would much rather blast a foe to bits than attempt to outwit or outmaneuver him in the volatile world of fiendish politics.

Typical Treasure

A cacodaemon has treasure appropriate for its CR, or about 22,000 gp. The majority of this treasure will be in magical equipment, especially any that improves spellcasting ability or increases armor class.

Cacodaemons with Class Levels

Cacodaemons that take class levels invariably take levels in sorcerer to increase their spellcasting prowess. In addition, powerful cacodaemon sorcerers will often take levels in the archmage prestige class.

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Xixel, Cryptodaemon Commander

This chitinous fiend resembles and insectoid centaur, with a vaguely anthropomorphic upper torso connected to a beetle-like thorax. It wears a vest of boiled leather, specially constructed to allow it full use of its four multi-jointed arms. The fiend is armed with four jagged-edged short swords, worn in an odd bandolier across its back, and a bulky crossbow strapped to abdomen along with a quiver bulging with bolts.

Xixel (CR 18)

Advanced Cryptodaemon Rogue 5/Assassin 5
NE Large Outsider (Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +10; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft; Listen +20, Spot +20
Language Abyssal, Draconic, Infernal, telepathy 100 ft.

AC 24, touch 15, flat-footed 24; improved uncanny dodge, uncanny dodge (-1 size, +6 Dex, +4 natural, +5 armor)
hp 191 (20 HD); **DR** 5/good
Immune poison
Resist cold 10, fire 10, electricity 10, evasion; SR 23
Fort +14, **Ref** +21, **Will** +11

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares), climb 20 ft.
Melee +2 cold iron short sword +22/+17/+12/+7 (1d8+7/19-20) and 3 +2 cold iron short swords +22/+17 (1d8+4/19-20) and bite +16 (1d6+2 plus poison)
Ranged +1 heavy repeating crossbow +22/+17/+12/+7 (2d6+1/19-20)
Space 10 ft.; Reach 5 ft.
Base Atk +16; **Grp** +25
Atk Options Point Blank Shot, Precise Shot, death attack, master flanker, poison, sneak attack +8d6
Special Actions hide in plain sight, summon daemon
Combat Gear potion of cat's grace, potion of cure serious wounds, potion of sneak
Assassin Spells Known (CL 5th)
3rd (1/day) – *magic circle against good*, *nondetection*
2nd (3/day) – *cat's grace*, *darkness*, *pass without trace*
1st (4/day) – *feather fall*, *jump*, *obscuring mist*, *true strike*
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 8th)
3/day – *invisibility*, *silence* (DC 15)
1/day – *greater magic weapon*

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Abilities Str 20, Dex 22, Con 20, Int 17, Wis 14, Cha 16

SQ daemon traits, poison use, trapfinding, trap sense +1

Feats Exotic Weapon Proficiency (heavy repeating crossbow), Improved Initiative, Improved Multi-Weapon Fighting, Multi-Weapon Fighting[B], Point Blank Shot, Precise Shot, Weapon Finesse, Weapon Focus (short sword)

Skills Balance +23, Bluff +21, Climb +26, Diplomacy +12, Disguise +8 (+10 acting), Jump +29, Intimidate +10, Hide +29, Listen +20, Move Silently +33, Search +21, Sense Motive +12, Spot +20, Survival +4 (+6 following tracks), Tumble +26

Possessions combat gear plus 4 +2 cold iron short swords, +3 leather armor, +1 heavy repeating crossbow, 20 masterwork bolts, 25 +1 flaming bolts, 25 +1 shock bolts

Death Attack (Ex): If Xixel studies his victim for 3 rounds and then makes a sneak attack with a melee weapon that successfully deals damage, the sneak attack has the additional effect of possibly either paralyzing or killing the target (Xixel's choice). While studying the victim, Xixel can undertake other actions so long as his attention stays focused on the target and the target does not detect the assassin or recognize him as an enemy. If the victim of such an attack fails a Fortitude save (DC 18) against the kill effect, he dies. If the saving throw fails against the paralysis effect, the victim is rendered helpless and unable to act for 1d6+5 rounds. If the victim's saving throw succeeds, the attack is just a normal sneak attack. Once Xixel has completed the 3 rounds of study, he must make the death attack within the next 3 rounds.

Hide in Plain Sight (Su): Xixel can use the Hide skill even while being observed. As long as he is within 10 feet of some sort of shadow, the daemon can hide from view in the open without having anything to actually hide behind.

Master Flanker (Ex): Xixel is quite adept at attacking foes from surprise or from behind. When flanking, he gains a +4 to hit, and any weapon or natural attack he uses while flanking is considered to have the keen weapon special ability, doubling its critical threat range. In addition, any critical threat rolled that would strike the target is automatically confirmed.

Poison (Ex): Injury, Fortitude DC 25, initial damage 1d8 Dex, secondary damage 1d4 Dex.

Summon Daemon (Sp): Once per day, Xixel can attempt to summon 1d4 additional cryptodaemons with a 60% chance of success. This is the equivalent of a 5th-level spell.

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Xixel is the least of Yaghur Hod's generals. He commands the Archodaemon's vast force of cryptodaemons and orchestrates all scouting, spying, and assassinations at his master's behest.

Background

Like many powerful fiends, Xixel's success and power has more to do with luck and perseverance than any defining trait setting him apart from his brethren. The fact that he was able to survive, learn from experience, and hone the natural talents of his race all but ensured that he would rise to prominence.

Xixel's luck was evident even as he crawled from the egg, as he managed to form a *ghoroka*, the clan or fighting unit integral to cryptodaemon society, composed of seven other hatchlings. Most hatchling cryptodaemons are killed and devoured by adult cryptodaemons, are any number of other lower planar predators that haunt the planes of Gehenna and Hades. The fact that Xixel was able to quickly form a *ghoroka,* which offered protection through numbers ad cooperation, ensured that he would survive, at least to adulthood.

Xixel's *ghoroka* existed on the fringe of cryptodaemon society at first, as it's members gained experience by hiring themselves out as mercenaries to more powerful daemons or serving either side of the war between the Abyss and the Nine Hells. In time, Xixel came to lead his *ghoroka*, and after many successful ventures as a spy, scout, and assassin, he and his clan mates began to rise in both prestige and power.

Now that his *ghoroka* had garnered enough power and prestige to compete with the other *ghorokas* at the pinnacle of cryptodaemon society, Xixel's turned his considerable abilities and those of his clan mates upon their rivals. In a furtive and deadly bid for power, Xixel and his *ghoroka* systematically eliminated their competition through a series of flawless assassinations, until at last, he and his clan mates stood atop the chaotic pile of cryptodaemon influence.

Since he led his *ghoroka,* and his *ghoroka* was the most powerful among cryptodaemons, Xixel was viewed as the de facto ruler of his entire race of daemons. Now he profited not only by the exploits of his own *ghoroka*, but he also gathered a percentage of all cryptodaemon activities, and was the point of contact for any fiends seeking cryptodaemon mercenaries.

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When Yaghur Hod returned, Xixel and his *ghoroka* soon fell under the sway of the mighty daemon's influence, and where Xixel went, the rest of his race followed. Xixel now serves his master by leading cryptodaemon troops into battle, as well as planning scouting forays and assassinations, should they be required. Unlike the other three generals that serve Yaghur Hod, Xixel does not see his peers as rivals. Since they are not cryptodaemons, he views them as outside of the vicious pecking order of *ghorokas* and therefore not a threat.

Strategies and Tactics

Like all cryptodaemons, Xixel will rarely be encountered alone. He typically keeps at least three members of his *ghoroka* around him at all times. These clan mates, powerful daemons in their own right, serve as both bodyguards and a vital connection to cryptodaemons society.

Before combat, if given time, Xixel will cast *cat's grace* and *invisibility*, and then attempt to move into position for a death attack. If he is alone, he attempts to hide in plain sight every round, or, if there are no shadows available, cast *invisibility,* again allowing him to position himself for a death attack. When fighting along with members of his *ghoroka*, he will attempt to flank his opponents every round, bringing his deadly array of attacks and formidable sneak attack damage into play as often as possible.

Cryptodaemon

Like a strange insectoid centaur, this creature combines a chitinous lower abdomen with a vaguely anthropomorphic upper body. Four multi-jointed arms jut from the segmented torso, each ending in a prehensile claw, and six spindly legs support the beetle-like lower body. The beast's head vaguely resembles that of a praying mantis, although the mandibles are much longer, serrated, and drip a foul green fluid. A merciless intelligence gleams in each massive, multifaceted eye, and the creature has a decidedly fiendish cast.

Cryptodaemon (CR 4)

Always NE Medium Outsider (Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +8; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft; Listen +9, Spot +9
Language Abyssal, Infernal, telepathy 100 ft.

AC 18, touch 14, flat-footed 18; uncanny dodge (+4 Dex, +2 natural, +2 armor)
hp 22 (4 HD); **DR** 5/good

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Immune poison
Resist cold 10, fire 10, electricity 10; SR 13
Fort +5, **Ref** +8, **Will** +6

Speed 30 ft. (6 squares), climb 20 ft.
Melee cold iron short sword +6 (1d6+1/19-20) and
3 cold iron short swords +6 (1d6+1/19-20) and
bite +3 (1d4 plus poison)
Ranged masterwork light crossbow +9 (1d8/19-20)
Space 5 ft.; **Reach** 5 ft.
Base Atk +4; **Grp** +5
Atk Options expert flanker, sneak attack +2d6
Special Actions hide in plain sight, poison, summon daemon
Combat Gear *potion of cat's grace*, *potion of sneak*
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 8th)
3/day – *invisibility*, *silence* (DC 14)
1/day – *greater magic weapon*

Abilities Str 13, Dex 18, Con 13, Int 12, Wis 15, Cha 14
Feats Improved Initiative, Multi-Weapon Fighting[B], Weapon Finesse
Skills Balance +6, Bluff +9, Climb +16, Diplomacy +4, Disguise +2 (+4 acting), Jump +10, Intimidate +4, Hide +15, Listen +9, Move Silently +15, Search +8, Spot +9, Survival +2 (+4 following tracks), Tumble +13
Possessions combat gear plus 4 cold iron short swords, masterwork leather armor, masterwork light crossbow, 20 bolts
Advancement 5-8 (Medium); 9-12 (Large)

Expert Flanker (Ex): Cryptodaemons are quite adept at attacking foes from surprise or from behind. When flanking, a cryptodaemon gains a +3 to hit, and any weapon or natural attack it uses while flanking is considered to have the keen weapon special ability, doubling its critical threat range.

Hide in Plain Sight (Su): A cryptodaemon can use the Hide skill even while being observed. As long as it is within 10 feet of some sort of shadow, the daemon can hide itself from view in the open without having anything to actually hide behind.

Poison (Ex): Injury, Fortitude DC 13, initial damage 1d4 Dex, secondary damage 1d4 Dex. The save DC is Constitution-based.

Sneak Attack (Ex): A cryptodaemon can make a sneak attack like a rogue, dealing an extra 2d6 points of damage whenever a foe is denied his or her Dexterity bonus, or when the cryptodaemon is flanking.

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Summon Daemon (Sp): Once per day, a cryptodaemon can attempt to summon another cryptodaemon with a 30% chance of success. This is the equivalent of a 2nd-level spell.

Skills: Cryptodaemons have a +4 racial bonus to Hide and Move Silently checks. A cryptodaemon has a +8 racial bonus on Climb checks and can always choose to take 10 on Climb checks, even if rushed or threatened.

Background

Cryptodaemons are minor fiends native to the planes of Gehenna and Hades. They often act as scout and spies in the service of more powerful fiends, or in the eternal conflict between the Abyss and the Nine Hells.

Strategies and Tactics

Cryptodaemons always operate in groups of three or more, using group tactics such as flanking and even grappling to neutralize opponents. They are most often employed as spies and assassins, and most cryptodaemons will avoid a pitched battle if it endangers their mission.

Furtive and underhanded, cryptodaemons prefer to attack with the element of surprise. They typically open combat from the safety of an *invisibility* spell, and then strike their opponent while he is flat-footed. Groups of cryptodaemons flank their foes, making excellent use of their four attacks and sneak attack damage. Against tougher foes, cryptodaemons use *greater magic weapon* to improve their chances of hitting a target, and target their enemy with bite attacks to weaken and erode his combat effectiveness.

Most cryptodaemons carry light crossbows or shortbows in addition to their short swords, and do not hesitate to pepper an enemy with missile fire if the opportunity arises.

Sample Encounter

Cryptodaemons are often encountered in groups of between 3 and 6 individuals. These small squads are employed on assassination missions, especially against weaker mortals that have angered more powerful daemons. Additionally, cryptodaemon squads serve as mercenary scouts and spies in both the infernal and abyssal armies.

Cryptodaemon Assassination Squad (EL 8): This assassination squad consists of four cryptodaemons, each well versed in the tactics of ambush and murder. This squad has worked together before and is

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familiar enough with one another's tactics that they can operate easily as a single, cohesive enemy.

Ecology

Cryptodaemons are one of the older races of daemon-kind, and are one of the most commonly encountered away from the lower planes. Neutral evil petitioners that have served the cause of true evil in life are sometimes made into cryptodaemons as a reward for their service.

Unlike many daemons, which must be created from the soul stuff of mortal petitioners, cryptodaemons can reproduce naturally. Each cryptodaemon is asexual and once every 7 years can lay a clutch of up to a dozen small, leathery eggs. These eggs are guarded closely by the parent cryptodaemon until they hatch, at which point the newly birthed daemons are left to fend for themselves. The ability to reproduce in this manner allows for huge numbers of the lesser fiends, and they can be found in massive hordes upon the planes of Gehenna and Hades.

Environment: Cryptodaemons are native to both Gehenna and Hades, and like most daemons, can also be found in the Nine Hells and the Abyss, serving as mercenaries in the eternal conflict between demon and devil. In addition, cryptodaemons are often sent to the Prime Material Plane to deal with mortals that have offended powerful daemon lords.

Physical Characteristics: An average cryptodaemon stands a bit over 5 feet in height and is roughly 7 feet long. It is light for its size, and weighs just over 100 pounds. Cryptodaemons are a mottled green in color, with black claws and mandibles.

Society: Cryptodaemons are very social daemons and get along well with one another. They share a limited group mind, which allows for instant communication between individuals, and makes them more effective in combat. Cryptodaemons value stealth over brawn, and their leaders are typically individuals with rogue and/or assassin levels.

The most important aspect of cryptodaemon life is the *ghoroka*, the small squad that every cryptodaemon seeks to be a part of. Each *ghoroka* consists of between 3 and 6 members, and each focuses on a certain task, usually scouting or assassination. The *ghoroka* is led by the most skilled member of the group, usually an advanced cryptodaemon or one with rogue levels.

Cryptodaemons measure their status and worth by the *ghoroka* they belong to, and there is no greater shame in cryptodaemon society than

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to be cast out of one's *ghoroka*. Individual cryptodaemons will quickly go mad and become suicidal if they are unable to join another *ghoroka* within a few weeks.

Typical Treasure

Cryptodaemons value magical items that enhance stealth or agility, and most of their individual items will be *potions of sneak, cat's grace,* or occasionally, a minor item, such as a *cloak of elvenkind*. Cryptodaemons have standard treasure for the CR, about 1,200 gp.

For Player Characters

A cryptodaemon can be summoned with a *summon monster V* or a higher level *summon monster* spell. Spellcasters summoning cryptodaemons typically cast *summon monster VI* or *summon monster VII* to gain two or more of the lesser fiends, as they are more effective in small groups. Treat a cryptodaemon as if it were on the 5th-level list of the Summon Monster table in the PHB.

Cryptodaemons with Class Levels

A cryptodaemon's favored class is rogue, and more powerful individuals will often take levels in assassin as well. Cryptodaemons occasionally become clerics of whatever daemon lord they serve, strengthening their *ghoroka* with divine magic. A cryptodaemon cleric has access to the death, darkness, and evil domains.

Spell Resistance: A cryptodaemon has spell resistance equal to 13 + 1 per class level.

Level Adjustment: +4

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Zeeosh, Azodaemon Commander

This horrific, bat-like fiend issues a high-pitched shriek and beats its chest in rage before swooping in to the attack.

Zeeosh (CR 21)

Advanced Azodaemon Barbarian 5
NE Large Outsider (Air, Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +5; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft; Listen +32, Spot +35
Language Abyssal, Auran, Infernal, telepathy 100 ft.

AC 29, touch 17, flat-footed 29; improved uncanny dodge, uncanny dodge (-1 size, +5 Dex, +12 natural, +3 ring)
hp 369 (27 HD); **DR** 10/good
Immune acid, falling damage, poison
Resist cold 10, fire 10, electricity 10; SR 24
Fort +25, **Ref** +19, **Will** +16

Speed 30 ft. (6 squares), fly 90 ft. (good); *freedom of movement*
Melee 2 wing slashes +37 (3d6+11) and bite +37 (2d6+5 plus poison) and 2 claws +37 (1d6+5)
Space 10 ft.; **Reach** 10 ft.
Base Atk +27; **Grp** +42
Atk Options Cleave, Flyby Attack, Great Cleave, Hover, Power Attack, Wingover, improved grab, poison, rage 2/day
Special Actions plummeting destruction, summon daemon
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 22nd)
At will – *deeper darkness*, *invisibility*, *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only), *mirror image*, *wind wall*
3/day – *control winds* (DC 18), *gaseous form*
1/day – *chain lightning* (DC 19), *summon monster VII* (huge air elemental only)

Abilities Str 32, Dex 20, Con 26, Int 13, Wis 14, Cha 17
SQ daemon traits, fast movement, immune to falling damage, trap sense +1
Feats Cleave, Flyby Attack, Great Cleave, Hover, Improved Multiattack, Improved Natural Attack (bite), Improved Natural Attack (wing slash), Multiattack, Power Attack, Track[B], Wingover
Skills Climb +41, Hide +26, Intimidate +33, Jump +16, Knowledge (the planes) +26, Listen +32, Move Silently +30, Search +34, Spot +35, Survival +32 (+34 following tracks, +34 on other planes)
Possessions *ring of freedom of movement*, *ring of protection +3*

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Immune to Falling Damage (Su): Zeeosh's connection to the Elemental Plane of Air grants him immunity to all falling damage.

Improved Grab (Ex): To use this ability, Zeeosh must hit with a claw attack. He can then attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity.

Plummeting Destruction (Ex): Zeeosh is immune to falling damage, and will often use this fact to his advantage in combat. The mighty azodaemon will often choose to dive from the air and attempt to slam into an opponent, inflicting 1d6 points of bludgeoning damage to an opponent so targeted per 10 feet he "falls," to a maximum of 20d6. An opponent targeted in this manner can attempt to avoid Zeeosh by making a DC 31 Reflex save, taking no damage on a successful save. Whether the target's save is successful or not, Zeeosh is stunned for one round after using plummeting destruction.

Rage (Ex): Twice per day, Zeeosh can enter a state of fierce rage that lasts for 13 rounds. The following changes are in effect as long as he rages:

AC 27 (touch 15, flat-footed 27)

hp 423

Melee 2 wing slashes +39 (3d6+13) and bite +39 (2d6+6 plus poison) and 2 claws +39 (1d6+6)

Fort +27, **Will** +18

Abilities Str 36, Con 30

Skills Climb +43, Jump +18

At the end of his rage, Zeeosh is fatigued for the duration of the encounter.

Summon Daemon (Sp): Once per day, Zeeosh can attempt to summon another 1d4 azodaemons with a 60% chance of success. This is the equivalent of a 6th-level spell.

Poison (Ex): Injury, Fortitude DC 31, initial damage 1d10 Str, secondary damage 1d10 Str. Outsiders are not immune to Zeeosh's poison. The save DC is Constitution-based.

Zeeosh is the barbaric commander of Yaghur Hod's azodaemons. He ranks third in power and prominence among the Archodaemon's generals.

Background

Although generally neutral evil, azodaemons have definite chaotic tendencies, a trait that is quite evident in their barbaric leader, Zeeosh. His savageness and unrelenting brutality is legendary even among other

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azodaemons, and he climbed to his current position by simply tearing his rivals to pieces and feasting on their remains.

Zeeosh rose to prominence, as many azodaemons do, by selling his services to the various archfiends on the Nine Hells and the Abyss. Together with a group of four other elite azodaemons, Zeeosh gained both profit and prestige by acting as the leader of an aerial scouting and skirmishing unit. The powerful azodaemon found much in common with the demon princes he often served, letting the more chaotic side of his personality grow stronger with each successful mission on the Abyss.

When he retuned to Hades, Zeeosh found that he was among the most powerful azodaemons in existence. Sharing power, however, did not satisfy the elite azodaemon, and he immediately set out to remove all rivals, eventually slaying them all in bloody and brutal fashion. As the strongest of his race, Zeeosh became the recipient of a portion of all wealth brought in by azodaemon mercenaries, and continued to grow in both power and prestige.

When Yaghur Hod returned, Zeeosh was the obvious choice to lead the Archodaemon's aerial forces. With no choice other than to serve the immensely powerful daemon, Zeeosh accepted the position of one Yaghur Hod's four generals, and has more or less accepted his subservient role. He has a tentative alliance with another of Yaghur Hod's generals, the powerful terradaemon Nyxus, and generally supports his ally in a heated rivalry against the cacodaemon leader Turgon.

Strategies & Tactics

Zeeosh follows uses the same tactics as his lesser brethren, and always attempts to fight in the air. He rages at the beginning of nearly every encounter, and then tears into his opponent with a fusillade of claw, bite, and talon attacks. He generally devotes at least 5 points of his attack bonus to the Power Attack feat to further increase his damage output. He generally forgoes the use of his spell-like abilities unless he is faced with a truly daunting foe, and even then, he vastly prefers to rend his enemies with tooth and claw rather than bring them low with magic.

Against aerial opponents, Zeeosh uses Flyby Attack to confuse and harass clumsier flyers, or simply grapples with them, letting gravity do the majority of the dirty work. Zeeosh uses his plummeting ability on landbound opponents, or, if they are small enough, snatches them up and carries them aloft, there to be dropped from hundreds of feet in the air.

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Azodaemon

Outwardly, this horrific, winged fiend resembles a giant, anthropomorphic bat. In place of arms the fiend has two massive, membranous wings, each edged with a long spur of razor sharp bone. Its legs, bird-like and double-jointed, are tipped with iron-hard talons and look easily strong enough to snatch up an ogre in mid-flight. The fiend's head is gaunt, horned, and equipped with jagged fangs set into a powerful set of jaws. Finally, the beast's eyes are huge orbs of bloody crimson, overflowing with malice and fell intellect.

Azodaemon (CR 11)

Always NE Large outsider (Air, Evil, Extraplanar)
Init +3; Senses darkvision 60 ft; Listen +17, Spot +25
Language Abyssal, Auran, Infernal, telepathy 100 ft.

AC 24, touch 12, flat-footed 21 (-1 size, +3 Dex, +12 natural)
hp 125 (12 HD); DR 10/good
Immune acid, falling damage, poison
Resist cold 10, fire 10, electricity 10; SR 19
Fort +14, **Ref** +11, **Will** +10

Speed 20 ft. (4 squares), fly 90 ft. (good)
Melee 2 wing slashes +19 (2d6+8) and bite +17 (1d8+4 plus poison) or
Melee 2 wing slashes +19 (2d6+8) and bite +17 (1d8+4 plus poison) and 2 claws +17 (1d6+4)
Space 10 ft.; **Reach** 10 ft.
Base Atk +12; **Grp** +24
Atk Options Flyby Attack, Hover, Power Attack, Wingover, improved grab
Special Actions plummeting destruction, poison, summon daemon
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 12th)
At will – *deeper darkness*, *invisibility*, *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only), *mirror image*, *wind wall*
3/day – *control winds* (DC 17), *gaseous form*
1/day – *chain lightning* (DC 18), *summon monster VII* (huge air elemental only)

Abilities Str 27, Dex 16, Con 23, Int 12, Wis 15, Cha 14
SQ immune to falling damage
Feats Flyby Attack, Hover, Multiattack, Power Attack, Track[B], Wingover
Skills Climb +23, Hide +14, Intimidate +17, Knowledge (the planes) +16, Listen +17, Move Silently +18, Search +24, Spot +25, Survival +17 (+19 following tracks, +19 on other planes)

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Advancement 13-24 HD (Large); 25-36 HD (Huge)

Immune to Falling Damage (Su): An azodaemon's connection to the plane of air grants it immunity to all falling damage.

Improved Grab (Ex): To use this ability, an azodaemon must hit with a claw attack. It can then attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity.

Plummeting Destruction (Ex): Azodaemons are immune to falling damage, and will often use this fact to their advantage in combat. Azodaemons will dive from the air and attempt to slam into an opponent, inflicting 1d6 points of bludgeoning damage to an opponent per every 10 feet they "fall," to a maximum of 20d6. An opponent targeted in this manner can attempt to avoid the falling azodaemon by making a DC 22 Reflex save, taking no damage on a successful save. Whether the target's save is successful or not, the azodaemon is stunned for one round after using plummeting destruction. The Reflex save is Constitution-based.

Summon Daemon (Sp): Once per day, an azodaemon can attempt to summon another azodaemon with a 40% chance of success. This is the equivalent of a 4th-level spell.

Poison (Ex): Injury, Fortitude DC 22, initial damage 1d10 Str, secondary damage 1d10 Str. Outsiders are not immune to an azodaemon's poison. The save DC is Constitution-based.

Skills: Azodaemons have a +8 racial bonus to Search and Spot checks.

Azodaemons are massive aerial fiends native to the plane of Gehenna who often act as mercenaries in the eternal conflict between the Abyss and the Nine Hells.

Strategies and Tactics

Masters of aerial combat, azodaemons prefer to attack while flying, making heavy use of the Hover and Flyby Attack feats. They are most effective when dealing with other flying creatures; they can out-maneuver, and out-fight, most opponents in the air.

An azodaemon begins combat by casting *mirror image* or *invisibility*, and then swoops down to slash at its foe with a razor-edged wing. If a foe looks particularly powerful, the azodaemon will soften it up from afar with *chain lightning* or summon a Huge air elemental for aid. Against flying opponents, the azodaemon attempts to grapple its foe, binding

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the opponent's wings and employing its poisonous bite. Because of their immunity to falling damage, azodaemons are often content to let themselves fall from the sky, along with a grappled opponent. This usually means instant death for the grappled foe. Escaping from an azodaemon's grapple can be very difficult because of their weakening venom, which is so potent that it even affects outsiders normally immune to poison.

Against ground-based foes, azodaemons use their Hover and Flyby feats to inflict maximum carnage. An azodaemon can make five attacks while hovering, and does not land unless absolutely necessary, as it suffers a severe disadvantage on the ground. Azodaemons usually save their plummeting destruction attacks for use against powerful opponents. They often strike such enemies in groups, grinding the unfortunate target into paste beneath a rain of massive scaly bodies.

Sample Encounter

Azodaemons are rarely encountered alone, as they are almost always part of elite daemonic mercenary units. Individuals encountered are usually survivors of a massacred detachment, and will be focused primarily on returning to Gehenna to regroup. Azodaemon mercenary groups, called wings, are normally led by an advanced azodaemon, or by the powerful fiend that acquired their services.

Gargox's Wing (EL 20): Gargox, a 26 HD azodaemon, leads a wing of ten other azodaemons. Gargox has served both sides of the conflict between the Abyss and the Nine Hells, and has a close relationship with the archdaemon Graxus the Deceiver. He and his wing have aided Graxus in the many power struggles between archdaemons on the plane of Gehenna. In return, Graxus passes on lucrative mercenary contracts to the mighty azodaemon.

Ecology

Azodaemons are a relatively new species of daemon created by the archdaemon Typhonus to fill the role of aerial scouts and combatants for his mercenary army. It is rumored that Typhonus made a deal with a powerful elemental prince of air to give his creations mastery over the skies. This rumor is likely true, as it would explain the azodaemon's aerial adroitness, its ability to summon air elementals, and its bizarre immunity to falling damage.

The azodaemons proved highly effective, and soon Typhonus was

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besieged with inquiries from other archdaemons wishing to add the airborne fiends to their own armies. Typhonus, ever the enterprising fiend, sold his creations for astronomical sums of gold, magical items, and of course, favors and oaths of fealty.

Ultimately, selling off his creations led to Typhonus' downfall, as he foolishly sold wings of azodaemons to many of his enemies. These foes eventually banned together and used their superior numbers of common fiends, and of course azodaemons, to utterly destroy Typhonus.

Azodaemons are now quite common, and are seen as a necessary addition to any daemonic army.

Environment: Azodaemons are most commonly found on the bleak plane of Gehenna but, because of their mercenary natures, they can be found on nearly any lower plane. They are quite plentiful in the Nine Hells, as there is a noticeable dearth of devils skilled at aerial combat. Many archdevils hire wings of azodaemons to shore up this weakness in their own infernal armies.

Physical Characteristics: An average azodaemon, if it were to stand fully erect, would measure well over 9 feet in height. The typical specimen is surprisingly light for its size, weighing only 250 pounds. Azodaemons are markedly bat-like in appearance, and they are often mistaken for dire bats when encountered on the Prime Material plane.

Society: Azodaemons are flighty, nervous creatures, constantly moving and seemingly unable to sit still, for even a moment. This is likely due to their connection to the plane of elemental air, and it makes them unreliable and difficult to control. It takes a powerful fiend to lead a wing of azodaemons, as they can easily become distracted and lose focus on the task at hand. Typically, the promise of magical items or gems, which they are quite fond of, is enough to motivate them. The direct threat of lethal, bloody violence can also serve to reign in their unpredictable natures.

Typical Treasure

Azodaemons are fond of gems, especially sapphires, and will go to great lengths to get them. Although they do not wield weapons or wear armor, azodaemons will often make use of any protective magical items they might discover or receive as payment. Azodaemons have standard treasure for their CR.

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Metamorphosis
From Dretch To Demon Lord

The Complete Journey

by Aeryn "Blackdirge" Rudel

Death is only the beginning.

The wicked archmage Hazergal Redfist is dead, slain by the traitorous hand of his closest friend and confidant. The world rejoices as the tyrant mage's empire comes crumbling down, ending two centuries of brutal tyranny and war. But fate has only begun to weave the twisted skein of Hazergal's destiny, and as the light and warmth of life slip away, the former archmage finds himself on the bleak, demon-haunted planes of the Abyss, his soul condemned for all eternity.

Now merely a shadow of his former self, Hazergal is seemingly bereft of the awesome power he commanded in life. Alone, defenseless, and beset by the fell inhabitants of the Abyss, Hazergal faces countless eons of torment and humiliation, his eternal reward for a lifetime of wickedness. But Hazergal soon realizes that he is different from the other Abyssal petitioners. Memories of his former life remain, and in the deepest recesses of Hazergal's soul a terrible power grows: a power that will propel him along a course no mortal has ever undertaken, leading to the pinnacle of fiendish might.

But such power is a bright beacon of opportunity to the terrible Abyssal rulers, and Hazergal soon finds himself embroiled in the lethal politics of the chaotic plane. Forced to emulate the demonic inhabitants of the Abyss in both body and mind, Hazergal must navigate a treacherous landscape of chaos and evil aided only by unlikely allies and his own formidable intellect. And although destruction and damnation awaits him at every turn, the faint specter of ultimate power beckons Hazergal on, as he makes the arduous climb from dretch to demon lord.

This book contains the complete Metamorphosis Trilogy.

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